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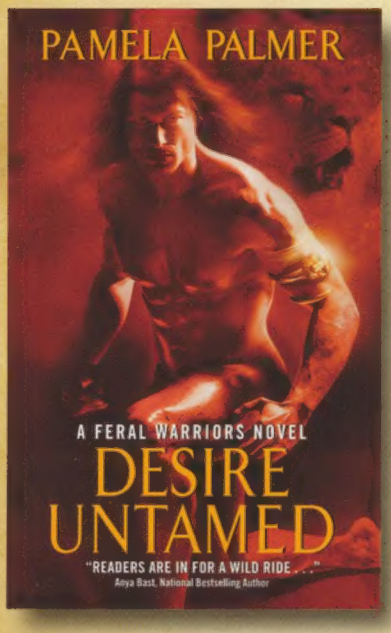
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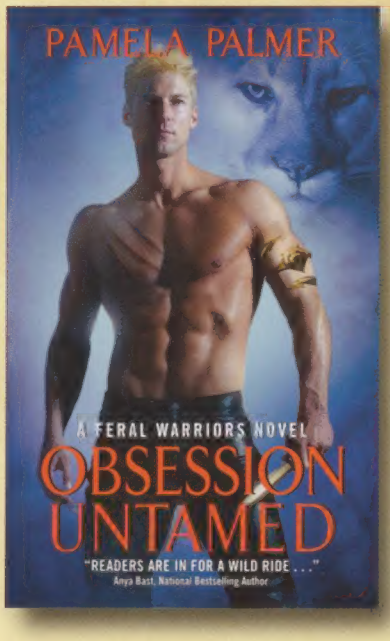
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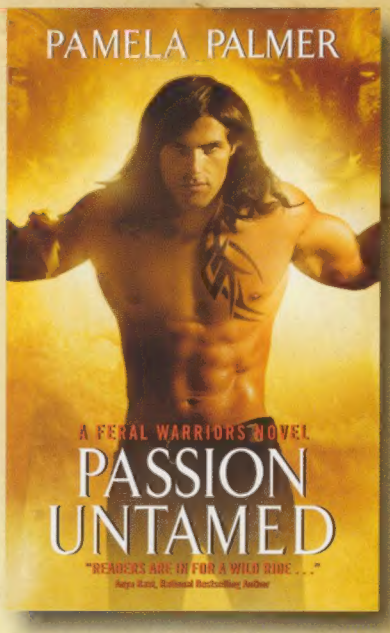

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Contents

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Departments

5 Advertisers

8 Games
by Matt Staggs
Pathfinder, Ghostbusters, and Geist: The Sin-Eaters.

12 Movies
by Resa Nelson
We all have guilty pleasures: those things we love but don't necessarily want to reveal.

17 Folkroots
by SatyrPhil Brucato
MAD, BAD & DANGEROUS: THE DEMON LOVER

62 Gallery
by Karen Haber
Jill Bauman is one artist who's not afraid to play in the dark.

67 Books
by Paul Witcover, Matt Staggs, Michael Jones, and Andrew Wheeler

ABOVE: Jill Bauman, see more on page 62
COVER: Carol Heyer

Fiction

27 Stories of the Sand
by Dirk Strasser
If we seek forgiveness and understanding we should look not inside ourselves but outside.

35 A Road Once Traveled
by Richard Parks
With age comes wisdom, but what good is wisdom with out someone to instruct?

43 Felicity's Engine
by Sharon Mock
In the battle between self-interest and loyalty, self-interest will always win. After a fashion, anyway....

45 In Time of Despair and Great Darkness
by Ken Scholes
True magic knows no place or time—it appears when it is needed and leaves when its job is done.

53 Narrative of a Beast's Life
by Cat Rambo
Humans were given dominion over beasts, were they not? So why has this manuscript been suppressed?

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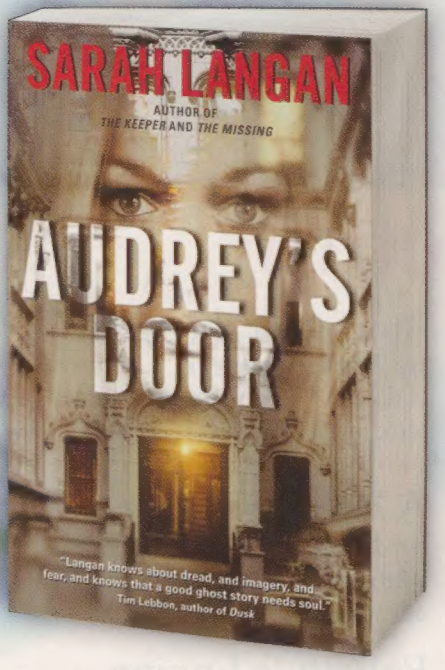
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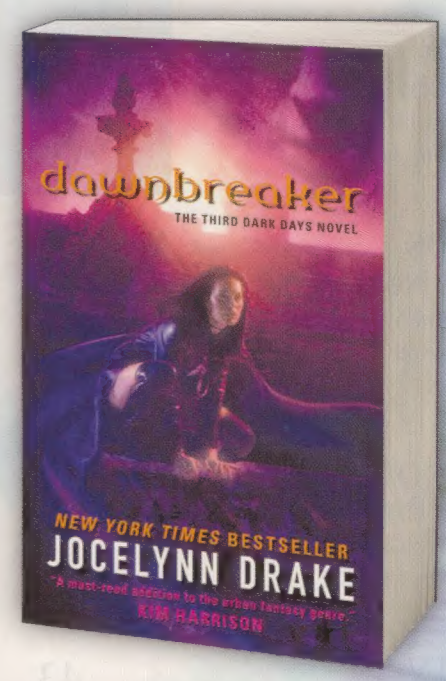

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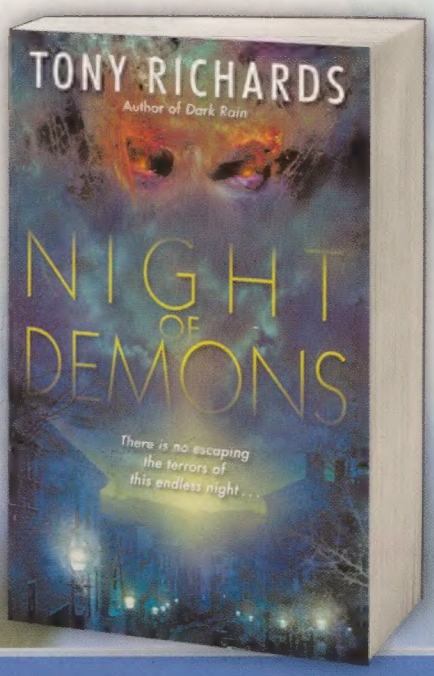

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Advertiser Index

Avon Books. 2

Eos Books 4

Infinite Worlds of Fantasy Authors 6-7

Galaxy Books 11

Five Strangers Films Limited 12

Fantasy Gallery Art 13

ImaJInn Books 16

Blackmore's Night 19

Kensington Books 21

Fantastic Books 24-25

Daw Books 37

Amber Quill Press 39

R. David Fulcher 41

Tir Na Nog Press 61

Wolf Singer Publishing. 68

Double Dragon Publishing. 69

Amber Quill Press 71

Fantastic Books 75

Yamato USA 82

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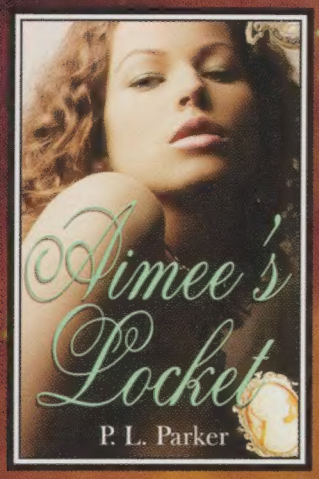

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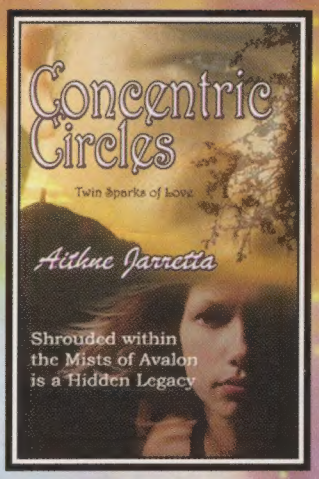

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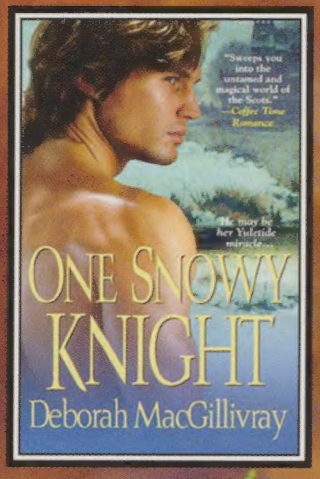

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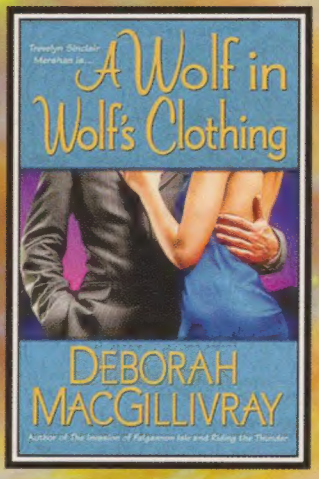

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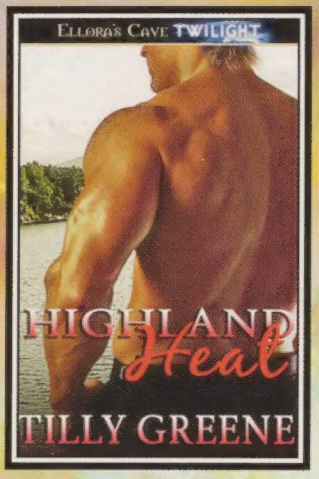

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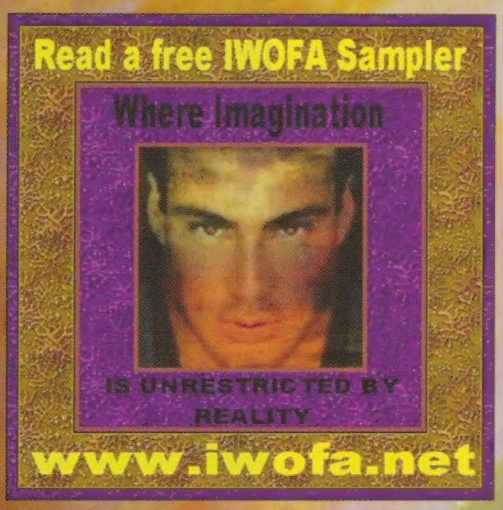

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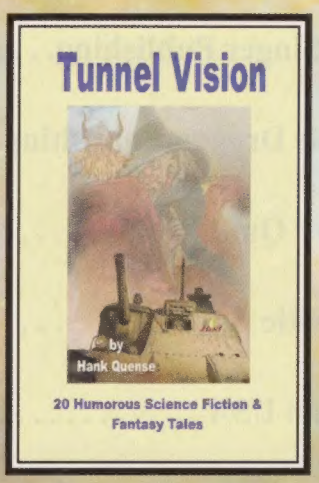

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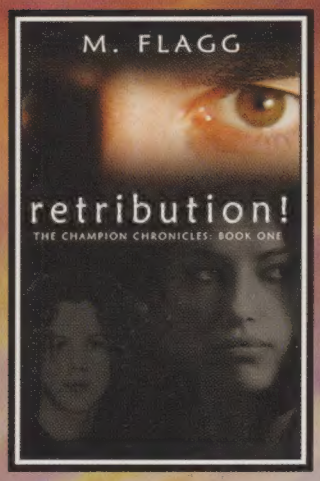

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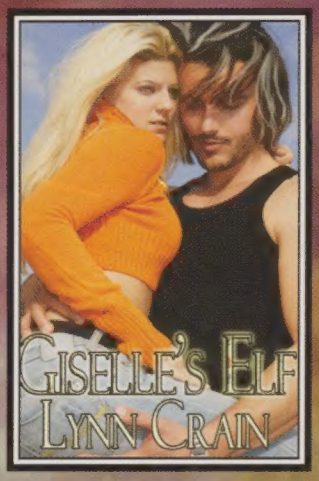

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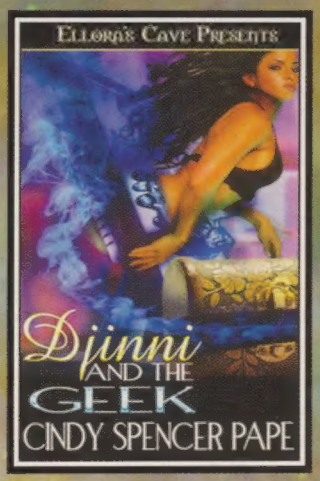

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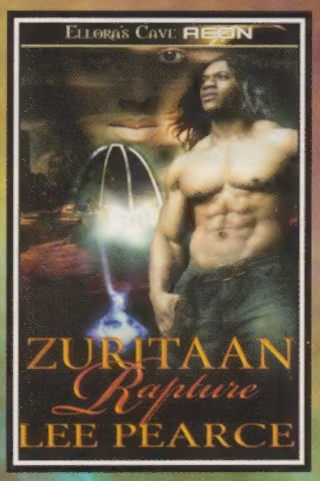

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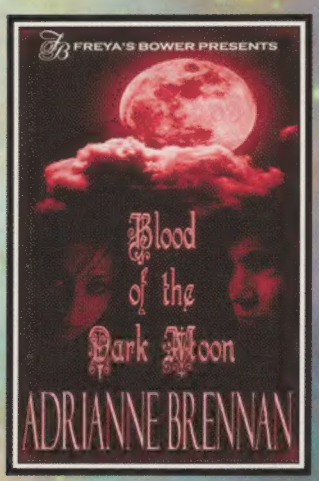

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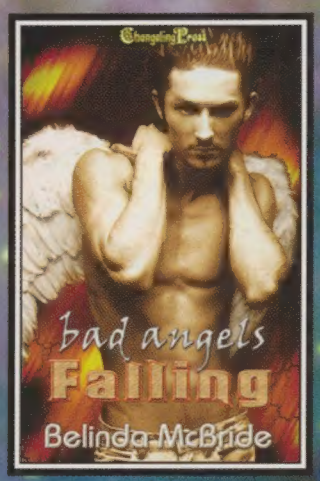

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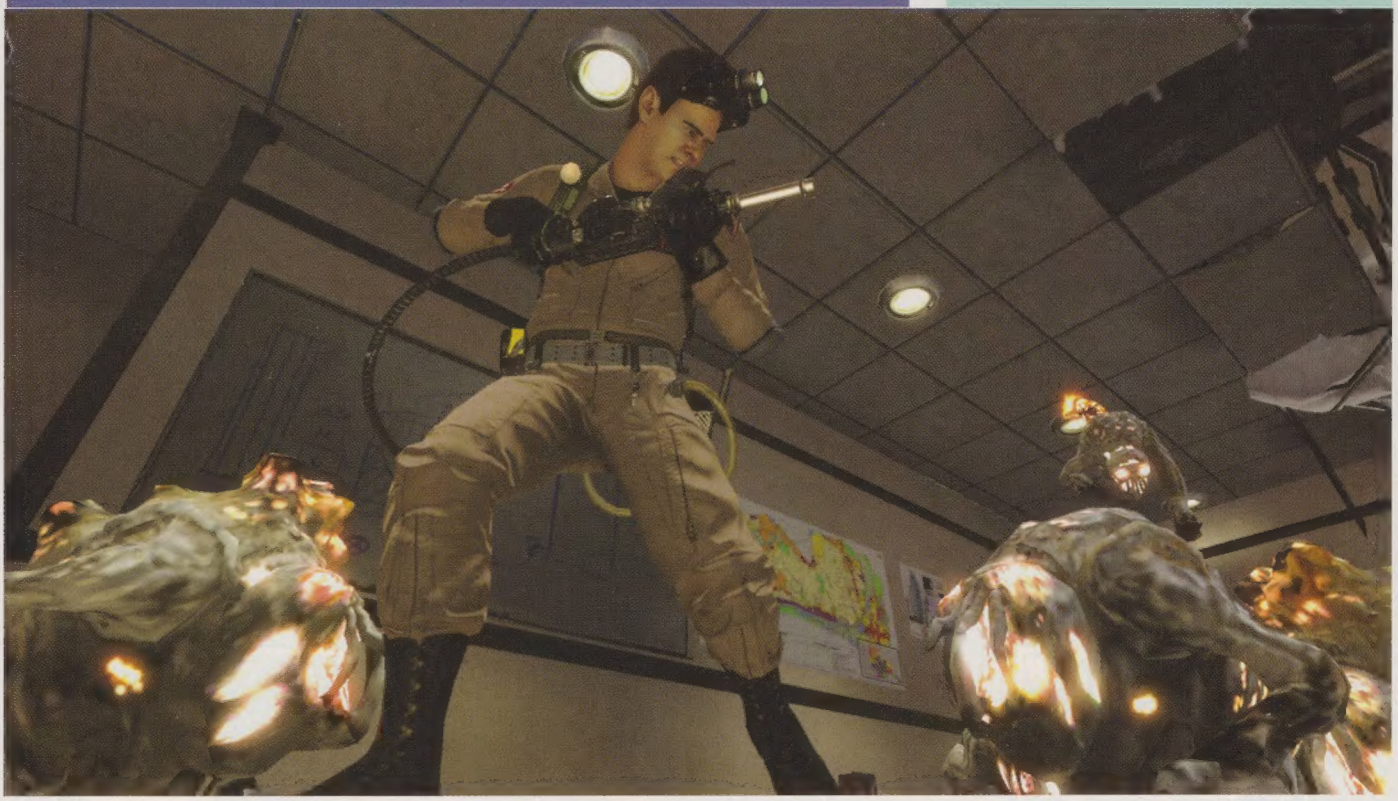


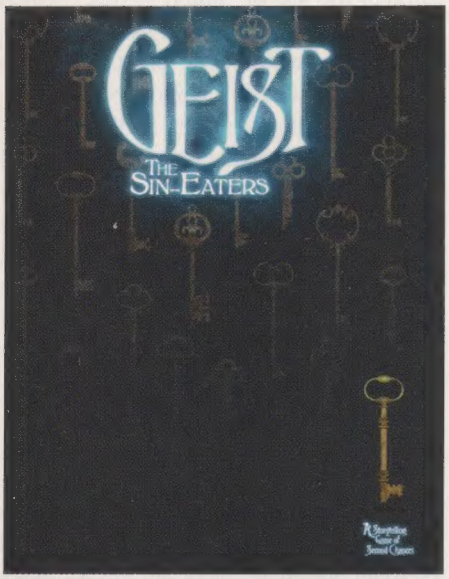
Ghostbusters, video game, Atari, $59.99. Reviewed for the Xbox 360

This has been a busy year for the Ghostbusters franchise. With talks of a new movie in the works, a reissue of the old Saturday morning cartoon, and the release of the first film on Blu-ray, it is hard to believe that Ghostbusters first graced the silver screen twenty-five years ago. The new Ghostbusters video game reunites the films' original starring cast—Dan Aykroyd, Ernie Hudson, Bill Murray, and Harold Ramis—as well as many of the minor players, all of whom lend their images and voice talent to the proceedings. The game, scripted by Aykroyd and Ramis, places the player in the shoes of a new recruit to the organization. The game begins with the Ghostbusters responding to the aftermath of a massive surge of psychokinetic energy. Ghosts are everywhere, and among them are some familiar faces. The Librarian ghost has returned to haunting the public library, and even the StayPuft Marshmallow Man is once again menacing the city's streets. It's up to the Ghostbusters to take charge of the outbreak and find its source. Along the way, they're dogged by William Atherton, once again reprising his role as longtime nemesis Walter Peck, formerly of the Environmental Protection Agency and now assigned to directly overseeing the Ghostbusters on behalf of the Paranormal Contract Oversight Committee. While the game itself is gorgeous-looking, actually playing it is a chore. Most of the game's action is centered on defeating ghosts by using the proton pack and ghost trap from the movies. Capturing them is tricky: players have to first home in on them with a proton beam and then "slam" them repeatedly into the ground to weaken them. Only then can they be dragged into a trap. Sometimes the physics of the game seems a little off, and actually seeing where your beam is going and what it's going to hit becomes a guessing game. What's worse is that this slamming technique becomes a central part of play, and most of the antagonists must be defeated in this way. While busting those first few ghosts can be fun, after a while it becomes tedious. Throughout the course of play, opportunities are given to upgrade the functions of the proton pack, but even this can't keep the action fresh. Once a new device is introduced, it too is quickly overused. While the Ghostbusters game might offer an enjoyable evening or two of casual play, it is hard to imagine that anyone but the most committed fans of the franchise would find it entertaining for any longer than that.

Geist: The Sin-Eaters, role-playing game, core rulebook, White Wolf, hardcover, 320 pp., $34.99, ISBN: 978-1588463777

Geist: The Sin-Eaters is the most recent game published by White Wolf for use with its World of Darkness game system.

As with the other games in this line, the World of Darkness core book (sold separately) is required to utilize Geist. Players in Geist take the roles of characters that



have been joined with supernatural entities called "geists" during the course of a near-death experience. As the human being stands at death's threshold, the geist offers him or her another chance at life, but only if he or she agrees to share his or her body with it. There are several kinds of geists, and the sort that attaches itself to the character depends on the way he or she died. Called "Thresholds," players choose one at the time of character creation. "The Torn" are those who were the victims of violence or similarly traumatic causes of death; "The Silent" are those who died due to deprivation of some sort; "The Prey" are those who were the victims of nature or the wild; "The Stricken" are those who died due to disease; and "The Forgotten" are those who died due to a freak occurrence or mere chance. Each Threshold provides the player with access to different spheres of supernatural influence, called "Keys." These allow the character to do amazing—and sometimes disturbing—things, such as controlling an enemy like a marionette, inflicting diseases on others, or twisting and shaping one's own body into new and useful forms. While playing host to a geist does confer a great deal of advantages, it also comes with plenty of dangers. These entities were once the spirits of human beings, but have now become something more akin to archetypes, embodiments of obsessions that are often, but not always, related to the cause of their death. Driven by its compulsions, the geist constantly wages a war with its host, hoping to wear him or her down enough so that it can assume control. This ongoing battle isn't the only problem that hosts face. A person who is bound to a geist is called a "sin-eater." The nickname comes from the real-world tradition of men and women who would ceremonially take on the sins of the recently deceased, redeeming him or her and clearing a path to heaven. While the sin-eaters of Geist don't take on the sins of the deceased, they play a vital, if not always voluntary, role in freeing them from their earthly chains. Geist's sin-eaters have a permanent connection with death that allows them to communicate with ghosts and other restless spirits. This isn't necessarily a gift. Not all of these are friendly, or even sane, and they'll do anything to recruit or compel a sin-eater into helping them resolve whatever unfinished business is keeping them from moving on. As such, the life of a sin-eater can be one of near-constant harassment from the dead. Some sin-eaters choose to assist ghosts, while others work to destroy them. Still others seek relief from them by way of ancient ceremonies that have been passed down by generations of sin-eaters. While interacting with ghosts is a big part of Geist, it's not the only source of adventure. Sin-eaters face danger from stranger and more dangerous supernatural beings, and even from rival sin-eaters. As a result, many sin-eaters join together for mutual protection in collectives called "krewes." Fellow krewe members can gain power through enacting ancient rituals and sharing powerful artifacts. Searching for knowledge can be a rewarding part of play in itself, and quests for ancient wisdom can take sin-eaters through the world of the living and deep into the Underworld, a dangerous place populated by restless spirits and ancient powers beyond human comprehension. Geist is a game with great possibility. It would be just as feasible to run it as a game of existential horror and quiet dread as it would be to run a more action-oriented game focused on stalking and defeating supernatural monsters. The rulebook comes complete with a number of sample story hooks and detailed notes for running games set in New York City, so most players—especially those already familiar with the World of Darkness system—shouldn't have any trouble starting up a game.

Adventurer's Vault 2: A 4th Edition D&D Supplement, role-playing game, Wizards of the Coast, hardcover, 160 pp., $29.95, ISBN: 978-0786952045

In Dungeons & Dragons, treasure is one of the most important reasons—if not the most important reason—why adventurers brave the dangers of monster-infested dungeons again and again, and no treasure is more valued than magi-

cal treasure. Dungeon Masters know this, and while players will always appreciate another long sword +1 or Potion of Invisibility, it's always nice to be able to offer something special. That's where the Wizards of the Coast's Adventurer's Vault 2 sourcebook comes in handy, with its hundreds of magical items. Whereas the preceding volume, Adventurer's Vault, devoted some of its content to masterwork items and other non-magical gear, this book is exclusively devoted to magic items. It should be noted that there are fewer pages devoted to weapons and armor in this volume, but Dungeon Masters looking to award martial heroes are still going to find a lot to love here. Some choice examples include Death's Brink Armor, which prevents its wearer from dying until he or she has failed four death saving throws; Slime Armor, which causes attackers to suffer ongoing damage from corrosive acid; and Soul Drinker weapons that leech away an opponent's very life force. The other categories of magic items are well represented. In addition to the usual rods, staffs, wands, and rings, Adventurer's Vault 2 introduces magical tattoos. While at first glance it might seem impossible to "discover" a magical tattoo, the authors get around this through the use of "tattoo stones," which can be pressed against the skin for a permanent impression. The great advantage of a tattoo is that it is impossible to separate it from an adventurer. Sadly for players, characters can have only one magical tattoo at a time. Item sets is another new concept introduced in the book. These are magic items that are made to work together. While each item in the set can be used by itself, their true potential is revealed only after collecting them all. Each set comes with a bit of flavor text describing its background and lore about its usage. Discovering and tracking down all of the items in a set could spur an adventure all in itself. The Adventurer's Vault 2 is a book that every Dungeon Master should consider adding to his or her library, especially if he or she is planning on running a long-term campaign. While new magic items like these aren't going to be used in every game or be perfect for every player, mixing them in over time can keep the spirit of discovery alive for even the most experienced gamers.

Matt Staggs is Realms of Fantasy's games reviewer and also a regular contributor of fiction reviews. When he's not reading, writing or gaming, Matt enjoys spending time with his wife and surfing the web. If you'd like to send Matt a book or game for review, contact him at mattormeg@gmail.com. ☙

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Resa Nelson

We all have guilty pleasures: those things we love but don't necessarily want to reveal. For the first time, the staff, authors, and artists of Realms of Fantasy reveal their favorite "guilty pleasure" movies.

Shawna McCarthy, Fiction Editor

My guilty pleasure is Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. My kids were right smack in the middle of the target age when it came out, and if I've seen it once I've seen it fifty times, and I never once said, "Not that again!" What do I love about it? Well, first off, Belle. She loves books and she's proud of it. She's smart and strong and courageous (oh yes, and beautiful). Secondly, the movie never talked down to its audience. They knew that one day the little ones would be grown up enough to realize why Lumiere is the perfect name, and not just because it sounds French. Mrs. Potts and Chip? That still makes me smile. And of course there's the beautiful and clever score. But the single thing that makes Beauty and the Beast my guilty pleasure is the ballroom scene. Just remembering it and the gorgeous animation and the wonderful title song makes me tear up a little. Sigh.

(McCarthy won the Hugo Award for Best Professional Editor for *Asimov's* in 1984 and was nominated three other times. She was nominated last year in the Professional category for the World Fantasy Award for *Realms of Fantasy*, and twice previously for her work at Bantam Spectra and *Asimov's*.)

Richard Parks, Author

The Last Unicorn (1982) is my favorite guilty pleasure movie… ok, that's a lie. The truth is, I don't feel the least bit guilty about it, even though it's an animated movie aimed—in theory—at kids. Peter Beagle did the screenplay based on his novel, so the movie stays true to the spirit of his source material, and the themes of courage, love, loss, and redemption bear up on repeated visits. One reason I've never written a unicorn story is that Peter Beagle was there first, and he did it right.

Then there's the music performed by one of my all-time favorite groups, America, and that cast. Robert Klein as the voice of the butterfly? Alan Arkin as Schmendrick? Angela Lansbury as Mommy Fortuna? Tammy Grimes as Molly Grue? Christopher frickin' Lee as King Haggard? Even Rankin/Bass couldn't mess that up.

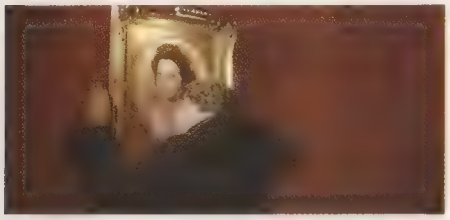
(Parks' first novel, *The Long Look*, was released in 2008 from Five Star Publishing.)

Gene Wolfe, Author

My top guilty pleasure is *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Bob Hoskins struggles to cope so nobly as a tough film noir private eye dropped into a Looney Tune. Besides, Roger says one of the wisest things ever said in a movie by anybody. And besides, Jessica Rabbit signed my copy of *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* despite being a character therein. And double besides, she sealed her signature with a kiss. And

there's Toontown, and a cameo by the Seven Dwarfs. When Queen Victoria returned from seeing *Pinafore* somebody asked what she thought of it . . . and she said, "I thought it was silly." Yeah!

(Wolfe's novel, *An Evil Guest*, was published in September 2008.)



Laura Cleveland, Former Managing Editor

I've loved *Somewhere In Time* since I saw it in a theater in 1980. Based on the novel by Richard Matheson, one of my favorite writers, it is a classic time travel story. Playwright Richard Collier (Christopher Reeve) is given an antique pocket watch by an elderly woman who whispers "Come back to me" in his ear. A few years later he visits the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island and falls in love with a photograph of actress Elise McKenna (Jane Seymour), who performed in the hotel theater in 1912. Obsessed with finding her, he discovers he can travel back through time with self-hypnosis. When Richard and Elise meet, they are drawn together for reasons neither understands. Richard intends to stay in the past, marry Elise, and write plays for her, but his discovery of an object he inadvertently brought with him into the past almost literally rips him from her arms and sends him back to the present. I know this sounds like pure schmaltz, but this movie has a lot to offer. It was filmed at the fabulous Grand Hotel and the scenery is a beautiful backdrop for the story. The score, written by John Barry and including Rachmaninoff's eighteenth variation of "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini," is a masterpiece. Jane Seymour was born to play Elise—her performance is impeccable. And what's not to love about a romance that continues for all eternity? Years after I first saw the film, I tracked down Matheson's novel. As is usually the case, the book is far better than the movie. If I wasn't sure that Hollywood would ruin it, I would love to see a remake of this film—as long as I can do the casting.

Douglas Cohen, Nonfiction Editor and Art Director

My guilty pleasure is the movie, *Dune*, directed by David Lynch. There aren't any legitimate cinematic or philosophic reasons for this pick. It looks like a classic 1980s B-grade movie (I *hate* B-grade movies), though my understanding is that when it came out it had a sizable budget. This movie is an adaptation of the novel of the same title by Frank Herbert. In a nutshell, we are introduced to a far-flung future where thinking machines are outlawed and mankind inhabits the farthest corners of known space. The most valuable substance in the universe is a drug commonly referred to as Spice. Spice expands consciousness and extends life. The only place it can be found is on the world of Arrakis, or Dune, a most inhospitable desert planet. The protagonist is Paul Atreides, a young nobleman with a multilayered destiny who will change the flow of Spice throughout the universe forevermore. *Dune* is a complex novel, and my summary hardly does it justice. But the movie is almost insulting to the novel. The adaptation is weak, much of the acting is poor, the costumes are ridiculous, the dialog is preposterous, and the creative changes are all for the worse. And yet . . . I love it. This movie led to me reading the novel, one of the best in all of speculative fiction. Also, my best friends introduced me to this flick. Years later, almost every line of dialog remains a private joke among us. This movie is supposed to be serious, but it's one of the funniest films I can think of. For that, I enjoy it . . . with much guilty pleasure.

(To learn more about Cohen's work at *Realms of Fantasy*, visit his blog: http://douglascohen.livejournal.com.)

Ari Berk, Author and editor of Folkroots

Don't tell my mother, but in April of 1981 (I was fourteen), my father took to me see John Boorman's *Excalibur* on a school night. My mother was out of town, but my dad was dying to go, and I promised I wouldn't rat him out. Besides, I had a feeling this movie was made for me. I

was right.

I know, I know, the late 1970s interiors, the anachronistic costumes, the curious blending of so many disparate Arthurian plots. But isn't that the stuff of myth? The refashioning of the timeless telling to fit a new age? I loved the battle scenes filled with anachronistically fully armored knights. I also was mightily intrigued by the love scenes that included fully armored (amored?) knights. Unforgettable. I'm glad to have seen it while young, before the work of scholars had begun to fill my head. Yet, even after many years of studying the Arthurian canon, this film remains a (yes, guilty) pleasure.

I was very taken with the presence of the land in the film. I had read most of the major Arthurian stories by that point, but had not been privy to glimpsing the wildernesses that served as backdrop for them. Now here they were in their verdant splendor. Never have I, then nor since, wanted so much to step into the landscapes of a film.

More than anything else, I was transfixed by Nicol Williamson's Merlin. I immediately changed my occupational aspirations from "paleontologist" to "sorcerer." I memorized the Charm of Making and would occasionally intone it under my breath before math tests. And even now, in traffic jams, Merlin's strange evocative spell rises from memory: *Anaal nathrakh, urth vas bethud, dokhjel djenve* . . . . It usually does the trick.

(Ari Berk is the author of *The Secret History of Giants*, *Coyote Speaks*, *The Runes of Elfland*, *GOBLINS!*, and a few other tomes for eccentric readers.)

Jane Yolen, Author

My Guilty Pleasure is the black and white movie *Truly Madly Deeply* which is the ghost story *Ghost* should have been. It's romantic (Alan Rickman, yum, as the dead lover who visits his still-living girlfriend, the always brilliant Juliet Stevenson) and funny and endearing and surprising. Directed by my favorite, alas dead much too young, director Anthony Minghella.

(Auryn Films, a small independent film company, made a 28-minute animated film based on one of Yolen's fairy tales, "The Girl Who Cried Flowers." Yolen wrote the script along with the director.)

Andy Duncan, Author

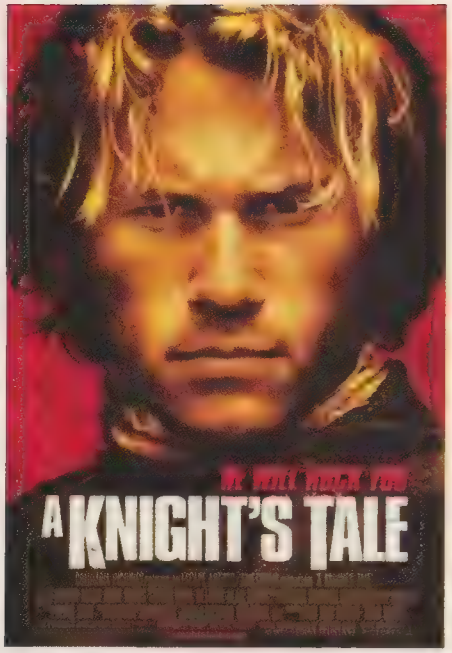
My fantasy guilty-pleasure movie is *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), which I loved as a child and still have a soft spot for, despite my adult realization that it's no good. It does contain a number of fine, memorable elements that should be in a better movie: the opening montage of the car's racing history, which transitions nicely to the poignant sight of the rusted-out old wreck sitting in the junkyard; the snatching of Grandpa's hut by the Baron's zeppelin—by grappling hook, if I recall correctly—and the flying car taking off in pursuit; the location shots of Schloss Neuschwanstein, which as a kid I assumed had been built especially for the movie; the Child Catcher ("There are children here somewhere; I can *smell* them"), and his comeuppance; the six aged inventors held prisoner by the Baron; and (of course) the car itself, and the other contraptions devised for the movie by Frederick Rowland Emett. I am charmed even by the parts of the movie that just don't fit, such as the casting of Benny Hill as the kindly toy maker: Who thought *that* was a good idea? The only thing about the movie I truly hate is its fatal decision to have the bulk of the plot—everything involving the Baron, Grandpa's abduction, and the lengthy Vulgaria sequence—be presented, from the get-go, as a made-up story, in which no one need have any stake whatsoever, certainly not the audience. Could that possibly have been the fault of Roald Dahl, who wrote one draft of the script? I hope it was imposed by other hands in the rewrite. Certainly the movie improves on Ian Fleming's book; Fleming had some gifts as a writer, but an ear for childlike whimsy was not among them.

(In 2009, Duncan's published work includes his new Pearleen Sunday novelette, "The Dragaman's Bride," in the anthology *The Dragon Book* from Penguin Putnam, and the second edition of his non-fiction book, *Alabama Curiosities, from the Globe* Pequot Press. Duncan was a Special Guest Author at the 2009 Science Fiction Research Association Conference.)

Resa Nelson
Movie/TV Columnist, Author

One of my favorite musicals is *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. A psychiatrist (Yves Montand) unintentionally regresses a college student (Barbra Streisand) through hypnosis to her past life in England, and he falls in love with who she *used* to be—not who she is now. It's funny and poignant. It's about reincarnation and a woman who has ESP and the uncanny ability to make flowers grow fast. Bonus: Jack Nicholson and Bob Newhart co-star.

(Nelson's first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword*, was published by Mundania Press in 2008, and her next novel, *Our Lady of the Absolute*, is slated for 2010.)



James A. Owen, Artist/Author

Anachronism has never been put to such blatantly fun purposes as it is in *A Knight's Tale*, my favorite guilty pleasure fantasy film. *Ladyhawke* runs a close second, and for similar reasons—all the trappings of the Age of Chivalry are present, but they're presented though a genuinely loopy lens. Most of *Ladyhawke* is played straight, but Matthew Broderick's running dialogue with God makes it addictive. However, *A Knight's Tale* pulls ahead for one reason: Paul Bettany's portrayal of Geoff. As in, Geoffrey Chaucer.

The other anachronisms ("We Will Rock You" as a jousting cheer; referring to a noblewoman as "my Foxy Lady") are sprinkled liberally throughout, and keep the film lively. But Geoff is a character without peer when it comes to entertainment value. He's the ne'er do well with oodles of ability, and a weakness for gambling. Every line is quotable (ironically), and when he takes up the role of the knight's squire-slash-announcer, he makes you wish he were available to write your PR.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that the characters are facing impossible odds and a creepy bad guy—and emerge victorious in the end, as characters in all good fantasy epics should. So, basically it's like *Braveheart*—but with a Queen soundtrack, and without anyone getting drawn and quartered.

(Owen is the author and illustrator of the best-selling series *The Chronicles of the Imaginarium Geographica*.)

William Shunn, Author

I fell in love in a movie theater in 1989.The object of my affection was *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, the ambitious 1989 comedy fantasy based on a collection of 18th-century tall tales that mocked the exaggerated stories told in Germany by the real Münchhausen.

Terry Gilliam's grand fantasy took me inside the rich storytelling world of the roguish Baron Munchausen. It blurred the line between fantasy and reality to an ever-greater degree, until the layers of recursion rebounded to present an exhilaratingly inverted "real" world. Along the way, the movie hit every major archetype of the quest fantasy—gathering a motley but talented assortment of traveling companions, stealing the forbidden fruit of a god, and descending into hell to contend with Death itself. By the end, I was sure I'd seen the greatest movie of all time.

It was only years later that I learned *Baron Munchausen* was widely regarded not only as one of the greatest financial disasters in movie history, but as one of the magnificent failures in Gilliam's erratic filmography. For a while I believed the hype, but watching, I couldn't help falling under its spell again on subsequent viewings.

I don't know how many times I've seen it now, but the movie never fails to transport me to a thrillingly dreamlike world. Veteran stage actor John Neville plays a huge part in this, providing the perfectly charming and smarmy conspiratorial wink that makes the viewer more than willing to suspend disbelief in his improbable adventures. The movie also benefits from a fine cast of supporting players both old and new, including Eric Idle, Jonathan Pryce, Oliver Reed, Uma Thurman, Robin Williams, Valentina Cortese, and even a very young Sarah Polley.

But in the end, of course, all credit is due Terry Gilliam, who in *Baron Munchausen* brought his distinctive vision to its most extravagant flowering. If this is guilt, I'll happily drown in it.

(Shunn's novella, *Cast a Cold Eye*, a ghost story co-written with Derryl Murphy, will appear in a limited edition from PS Publishing late in 2009.)

Jay Lake, Author

Mary Poppins is my guilty pleasure because the movie is so damned subversive. I remember watching it as a child, and living completely on the surface of the film. Watching it again as an adult, with my own daughter, has been a radically different experience.

The acting borders on the wretched in many cases, the sets are pure sound stage, the production values reasonable but not extraordinary even by the standards of the era. On the surface, this should be another throwaway Disney movie from a long line of Fred MacMurray and Jan-Michael Vincent vehicles. Yet it has the same compelling qualities as a good, solid train wreck choreographed by Bob Fosse.

Rainscape

by Jaye Roycraft

Rookie agent Dina Marlijn arrives on the planet Exodus carrying as many secrets as she hopes to unravel. She hides the fact that she's a telepath from everyone but her partner, for her abilities are close to those of the Dark Star dens, a race so hated they're banned from Synergy Worlds.

But there's one secret Dina keeps even from her partner. No one hates the dens more than she does. When her prime suspect, a dens calling himself Rayn DeStar, saves her life, Dina pursues him for answers. Trapped in a web of desire, mistrust, and betrayal, Dina crosses all the lines she never thought she would.

Dreamsinger

by J. A. Ferguson

creature. Nerienne is rescued by Durgan Ketassian, leader of the northern woods' rebels, but can she trust this man whom her mother condemned to die?

Durgan knows he cannot trust Nerienne, for the Tiria has been his enemy since she began slaying dreamsingers, those skilled musicians who sing the future through one's dreams. To save Gayome, Nerienne and Durgan must work together to defeat their common enemy.

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Consider this: The source material, P. L. Travers' novel *Mary Poppins* (1934) is much darker than the movie. What the script does with that material is amazing. The film came out just after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was first published, and thus is not likely heavily influenced by the emergence of first-wave feminism, but it manages to encompass a rather startling (for its time) view of women in society. The deconstruction of Mr. Banks' entire world within the story is devastating. I would in fact argue this movie is his story as protagonist, with Mary Poppins as antagonist. Combine this with some of the best snappy dialog and one-liners in modern film ("Never confuse efficiency with a liver complaint") and you have one of the most underrated films of the mid-twentieth century.

Every child should watch this film repeatedly, with an adult on hand who is comfortable discussing Edwardian politics, British fairy traditions, Derridaist critique, and sheer old-fashioned silliness. Every adult should watch this film with a complementary child.

I love it.

(Lake's book, *Green*, was released by Tor Books in June 2009.)

Eugie Foster, Author

I'm a sucker for fairy-tale romance and happily-ever-after endings, and *Beauty and the Beast* is one of my all-time favorite fairy tales. I love Robin McKinley's YA novelization of the story, *Beauty*, and I also adore the French, 1946, black-and-white *La Belle et la bête*, directed by Jean Cocteau, which the creators of the Disney version were obviously inspired by; the two movies share some distinctive elements such as the magic mirror and the rival suitor subplot. But the Disney version, with its singing and dancing tableware and bookish heroine, has been a perennial favorite since I first saw it in the theater. I also gotta admit that the ending—where the Beast lies dying on the balcony and Belle tearfully pleads, "Don't leave me," before confessing her love—always makes me cry. Every single time, weepy sniffling and Kleenex box clutching.

(Foster's short story collection, *Returning My Sister's Face and Other Far Eastern Tales of Whimsy and Malice*, debuted in March 2009 from Norilana Books. It includes a reprint of "Daughter of Bótù" as well as the title story, "Returning My Sister's Face," which were originally published in the February 2005 and August 2008 issues, respectively, of *Realms of Fantasy*.)

Resa Nelson has been the TV/Movie columnist for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine since 1999. She is a SFWA member and a Clarion graduate. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword* (published by Mundania Press), was a Finalist for the 2009 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy Novel and is the first novel in her Dragonslayer series. Her next novel is a standalone novel: *Our Lady of the Absolute* is scheduled for publication in mid-2010. Nelson's short fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, *Fantasy*, *MZB's Sword and Sorceress XXIII*, and other magazines and anthologies. Visit her website and blog at www.resanelson.com. ☙

The Dragonslayer's Sword
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by SatyrPhil Brucato

MAD, BAD & DANGEROUS THE DEMON LOVER

"Inside everybody there is another creature, a demon which doesn't care at all... and this demon is a man's real self, and a woman's real self."
—Colin Urquhart, from D.H. Lawrence's "The Princess"

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon has haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan"

"I don't *get* this *Twilight* thing" my friend complained. "That's not *vampires!*" She went on to lament the lack of true bloodsucker lore in Stepheanie Meyer's Cullen-clan cash cow. "Why," she groused, "are they so *popular?*"

Why, indeed? As of this writing, the sanguinary Mormon's sparklepire chronicles remain staggeringly lucrative. According to *Locus* magazine, Meyer's *Twilight* tales accounted for *almost 16% of all books sold in the USA* during the first quarter of 2009.[1] That's approximately one in every seven books dispensed in first-run bookstores, numbers not seen since the Boy Wizard left Hogwarts. Like Harry Potter, Edward Cullen inspires dismay among traditionalists. What, literally, is the deal here?—Why do Borders and Hot Topic host shrines to such... *defanged* confections?

My take on that popularity involves the primal appeal of the Demon Lover, a potent archetype whose passage ranges from the Bible to the best-seller list. Edward Cullen is really no less "authentic" than Spike or Lestat in the dim light of traditional vampire lore.[2] As an embodiment of the Demon Lover, though–that gorgeous bit of business who breaks the rules and looks great doing so—Edward sparkles in good company. He may seem a bit insipid next to Heathcliff or Hades, but his appeal remains obvious: He's the lover you should avoid, yet can't resist.

Such lovers come to us in male or female form. Occasionally, they manifest traits of one sex in the body of another, or blur gender lines into androgyny. In any form, these entities are "mad, bad, and dangerous to know;" as Lady Charlotte Lamb wrote of Lord George Byron, their innate charm and raw sex appeal house engines of our self-destruction. They seduce us simply by existing, and then—male, female, or both—they lead us to ruin. Some lucky paramours can meet and beat them on their own terms. Often, though, such tempters' tales end in annihilation.

What draws us to these creatures–these vampires, succubi, Elf-Knights, Elk-Charmers, Scarlet Women, and Big Bad Wolves? Why is it, in life and in fiction, that we're so drawn so readily toward the Bad Boy or Bad Girl? Some psychologists call this fascinating quality of attraction *the dark triad.* According to this observation, people who exhibit a seductive blend of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy tend to be unusually successful in business and in bed. This dark triad of personality disorders reads like a menu for demonic lovers; two even draw their names from Greek mythology.[3] A narcissist turns inward, fantasizes about power, and demands constant admiration from his companions. The Machiavellian manipulates people for his own ends without regard for their welfare, while the remorseless psychopath feels little empathy for anyone but himself. If this chilling cocktail of disassociations sounds like a tailor-made lure for Catherine Earnshaw or Mrs. Jean Reynolds, then those ladies are in good company. Dark triad people, real and fictional, exert a sometimes literally fatal attraction upon us. M. Scott Peck calls such men and women "people of the lie": folks who break rules and excite us because they seem to get away with it. In their disregard for consequence, they reflect what we may *feel* but dare not *perform.*

In fiction and folklore, these qualities come dressed up as *tempter archetypes*: figures that expose our desires, challenge us to seize them, and often punish us for doing so. Agents of what Northrup Frye calls "the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion," tempters are literally

the Satans in our collective unconscious funhouse. Decked out in garish costumes, they accuse us, pursue us, confront and entertain us, some might even say damn us. Like their mythic namesakes (*satan* – "to persecute, to pursue"; *diabolos* – from *dia* + *ballein*, "to hurl across"), these figures bedevil us. And few things in the human experience are more bedeviling than sex.

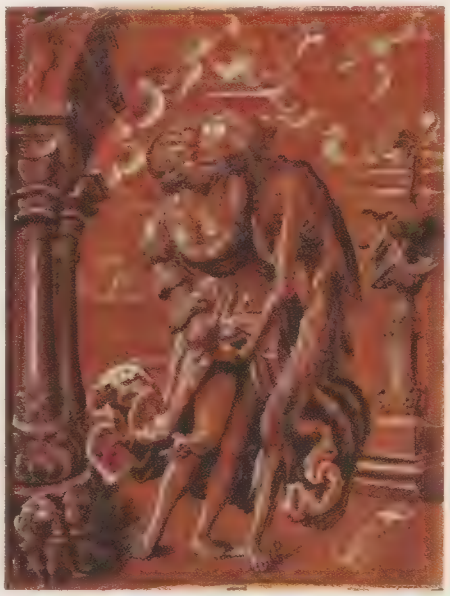
Sex and death – the brilliant contradiction! Here's where these seducers play. From the time we hit puberty, we're aware of urges we can hardly control. The rush of hormones, growth, and adulthood ushers in a world of confusion, a realm of sluts and studs, good feelings and bad reputations. Mixed messages surge from all sides: *DO IT! DON'T DO IT! DO IT, BUT DON'T GET CAUGHT!* And in that confusion, tempter archetypes take form.

On many levels, the Demon Lover reveals the face of the inner *shadow*, that beautiful trickster toying with all of us from within. According to Jung, this repressed spectre of hate and selfishness embodies all the aspects we hide away from ourselves. By connecting with the shadow, he claimed, a person could gain individuation—she might become whole by reconciling her psyche with her shadow. A shadow archetype, then, is a reflection of all we fear within ourselves. His lust is our lust, and power comes through claiming—if not acting on—it as our own.

Most folks fear the shadow and all it represents. Wrapping it in Satan's cloak, they project their most undesired traits onto someone else. That character or person then becomes a scapegoat for all they don't wish to recognize within themselves. Fiction and faerie tales carve out wonderful homes for such scapegoats. As Dorothy Van Ghent says in her book *The English Novel: Form and Function*, the Demon Lover Heathcliff is "an anthropomorphized primitive energy, concentrated in activity, terrible in effect." He's also, as the girls say, *hawt*. He may be bad, but he makes it look good!

> *"For the moment, you admire my beauty, which has turned more than one head; but sooner or later, you would regret having given your love to me, for you do not know my soul… get this into your head and never forget it: wolves and lambs do not look upon each other with kindly eyes."* —Maldoror, from The Comte de Lautréamonet's "The Songs of Maldoror"

Traditionally, the Demon Lover is male, ruthless, seductive, and often bestial. Even in cities or royal courts, his features and mannerisms link him to wild places. He is, as they say, a "beast"—a fox, a wolf, a goat, a stag. He's horny with or without antlers; like Heathcliff, he's got "eyes full of black fire." As shadows are, he is dark—perhaps not in skin, but in temperament. Often, he bears animal features: cloven hooves, shaggy hair, long



claws, sharp teeth. He may, like Dracula or Pan, exude a rank yet fascinating odor. "Never trust a man," says Granny in Angela Carter's screenplay for *In The Company of Wolves*, "whose eyebrows meet… The worst kind of wolf is hairy on the inside." That male Demon Lover has many faces. He's crude Coyote or magnificent Lucifer, stormy d'Urberville or smoldering Lestat. He might be tormented like Angel or proud like Spike, intoxicating as Dionysus or cold as Hades. He could be the spurned ghost of James Harris or the bygone revenant Count Dracula. At times, he walks the earth in mortal form—a Lord George Byron, an Aleister Crowley, a Pablo Picasso, or Charles Manson who'll seduce and then abuse you. His prowess is physical (James Bond), social (Valmont), material (Bluebeard), and often supernatural (the Elf-Knight). He might be wealthy as Baronne d'Aulnoy's Beast, or as poor as that "raggle taggle gypsy" sometimes called Black Jack Davy. As Alec d'Urberville says, "I am the old Other One come to tempt you in the guise of an inferior animal." In all forms, he upsets the applecart of propriety and then offers you forbidden fruit.

His counterpart, the Temptress, is more subtle, yet wild in her way. Beautiful, primal, passionate, and often insane, she blazes where her male counterpoint smolders. From literally the beginning, she has refused to follow rules or behave "as ladies should." Her defiance began with Lilith and hasn't changed much since. Like Faith from the Buffyverse, she feels betrayed by authority and so swears to bring it all down, using every weapon at her disposal, most especially her sex.

A truly transgressive Demon Lover archetype, the Androgyne, melds male and female elements together, working sexual mojo and confusion among paramours—and audiences—of all genders. Although this archetype is less overtly malicious than the others, s/he's often more challenging because of the outrage s/he presents to conventional gender roles. Bisexual (like Anne Rice's vampires), hermaphroditic (like Storm Constantine's Wraeththu), gender-switching (like Virginia Woolf's Orlando) or genderqueer (like David Bowie's various personas), this archetype appears to be a recent innovation. A look back, however, to the origins of incubi and succubi reveals a different tale. According to Thomas Aquinas, such spirits are both male and female; in female form, they gather semen from sleeping men, and then assume male forms with which to implant that stolen seed into sleeping women. The infamous *Malleus Malficarum* ("Witch's Hammer") blames deformed children on such demons, and credits every imaginable erotic abomination on horny devils and the witches who adore them. Transgression, it seems, is an equal-opportunity seducer—a "sweet transvestite" one moment, a raging bull or vamping siren the next!

Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh. — Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*

Stories of dark tempters are as old as tales themselves. Genesis 6:4 refers to the Nephilim, "sons of God" to whom "the daughters of men… bare children." This passage has been interpreted many ways over the millennia; even Jewish scholars disagree about the proper interpretation of *Nephilim*. Various sources trace the word to Hebrew roots meaning *giants*, *wonders*, and—tellingly!— *those causing others to fall*. The *Targum Yonatan* claims that the Nephilim were descendants of fallen angels (sometimes called the *Grigori*, or "Watchers," described in the First and Second Books of Enoch), who went among human beings and sired supernatural children. In any case, Genesis assures us the Lord was not down with this plan: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great… And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth." The subsequent flood may have drowned the Nephilim, but if folklore is to be believed, then their offspring (including the *se'irim*, "hairy ones" who sound a lot like satyrs) survived.

Beyond religious scriptures, sex remains fearsome for its own sake. It's both dazzling and terrifying to be so vulnerable to such strong sensations and emotions. Hearts, laws, and bones may be broken over sex; hells might be dared, earth shaken and the heavens invoked by its passions. A man might become a father or a fiend; a woman might become a mother, a witch, a whore, or all three. Prior to modern hygiene, medicine, and birth control, the intimate contact of sexuality could easily breed unwanted children or deadly disease—even now, those risks remain. Pandemics like syphilis, HIV/AIDS and the various plagues of medieval Europe linked eros with death in the popular imagination… and yet, without sex, human life would end. Then, too, the emotional rawness and carnal compulsions involved with sexuality may be even more confounding than its physical perils. Is it any wonder that we've created a host of demonic suitors to take us where we might not otherwise dare to go?

The ominous nature of sexuality has especially deep resonance for women. As people who have been oppressed for most of human history—largely because of their birth-sex, and sexual behaviors real or imagined—women feel the double-edge of Eros most keenly. Women are literally the gatekeepers of sexuality, seduced or stormed in order to gain access to the treasure everybody wants. Women risk far more from sexual encounters than men do. Yet the urges for erotic intimacy are no less powerful for women than they are for men; common lore, in fact, often claims that women want sex even more than men!

Despite this desire (or perhaps because of it), women are expected to maintain chaste virtue, while men are expected to challenge it. This theme—

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virtue tempted, challenged, and often overthrown—creates a central theme throughout Demon Lover tales. In her book *Demon-Lovers and Their Victims in British Fiction*, Toni Reed describes that figure as a creature "of mysterious charm and … perverse, dangerous impulses" who "attempts to dominate and destroy a naïve, impressionable woman and demonstrate(s) also her lack of perception and foresight." In the resulting "struggle of wills" between them, she adds, "neither side is admirable." Both parties violate the rules of virtue, and although they suffer for that transgression, they're transformed by it as well. Is it any wonder, then, that tales of Demon Lovers have always been so popular, especially among women? For a person whose life may be drastically changed, even ended, by sex, there's great potency in the archetype of an erotically fascinating yet ultimately destructive man who can literally drive a girl wild.

Popular misconception holds that fantasy, faerie tales, and fiction offer "escape" from mundane reality. Truth is, though, they really offer *tools for dealing with* mundane reality. And for people trapped between sexual urges and social realities, an imaginary confrontation with the Demon Lover, even when it ends in ruin, can be empowering, cathartic, and fun. Unlike Catherine Earnshaw, the Brontë fan survives her love affair with Heathcliff. Poor Cathy! Still, it's a beautiful story. Good thing the reader knows better than to go there… *right?*

Demon Lover tales follow certain patterns. In the beginning, an ordered and often "civilized" existence is interrupted by the entrance of a contrasting Other. That Other soon meets a heroine whose place in her community is established but often unsteady. An erotic ballet ensues, during which an attraction/repulsion dynamic flares between them. Eventually, though, the woman surrenders to the Demon Lover's potency. The end of the tale brings either redemption or damnation, but rarely satisfaction.

This attraction, let's note, is almost always mutual. The redemption or damnation may be mutual as well. Demon Lovers are as seduced by their prey as the prey is by the Lover. To win her, the predator alters his plans, takes risks, dares ruin, and often finds it. This element, among others, makes Demon Lover stories far more ambiguous than they initially seem. Many critics, when assessing the Demon Lover trope, see only the Bad Boy ruining the Good Girl. Look deeper at many of the popular stories, though, and you'll see more than simple cautionary tales. The fact that the Demon Lover is often changed (and sometimes destroyed) by the relationship gives such tales a powerful edge. For women (especially young ones) who feel inadequate in the face of social and sexual forces, the mere thought that *This hot dude wants ME!* can be pretty heady stuff.

O swollen heart,
O sky brimming with moisture –
tongued lightning first
and then thunder,
convulsive spatters of rain
and then wind, chasing the summertime heat.
Mira says: Dark One, I've waited –
it's time to take my songs into the street.
—Mirabai, "The Dark One is Krishna"

Oh, gods is the Demon Lover hot! His presence trounces convention, makes hearts flutter, sends old biddies whispering behind their hands as lesser men tremble and fume. His limbs and features recall what Annis Pratt calls "the green-world… pastoral settings… where societal constraints are non-existent." His passions shatter the World That Was and those passions, for better and worse, center on the object of his attentions. It's a Romantic notion in the most artistic interpretation—a rebellion of *sensation* over *sense*. How appropriate, then, that the Romantic movement would breed so many Demon Lovers, both real (Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Jim Morrison) and fictional (Lord Ruthven, Dracula, Lestat). The Demon Lover embodies Jung's *animus*, the inner unconscious masculine principle, and he does so without shame or apology. If he *is* damned then, like Lucifer, his is a magnificent damnation.

And he shares.

A woman embraced by the Demon Lover becomes *special*. She'll suffer for it, but she'll be remembered for it, too. No longer is she the little girl destined for a safe and virtuous existence. Because something special in her called out to the Demon Lover, she becomes a legend, too. Perhaps, like Bella Swan, she'll be so compelling that the monster will change his old ways; and if not, then like Persephone, she'll still be transformed. The fusty agents of order and reason may, like Abraham Van Helsing, drive stakes through the Demon Lover's heart and rape the stolen blood from the veins of his paramours. They may chop the wolf open and think they've set Red Riding Hood free. Yet Riding Hood has still spent her time within the wolf's belly. She has asked her questions and felt his fangs and she will never again be the child she once was. Like Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, she may die but her presence lingers, entangling itself into her Demon Lover's heart. He may destroy her, but in the process, she is exalted.

There's a deeper power, too, in Demon Lover tales. Beyond social caution and suicidal self-glorification, some women find initiation to a stronger psychic plane. In

her best-selling *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes of "the dark man… the innate psychic predator." To confront this man, perhaps to win him over or destroy him, is to seize power in one's real life as well. "The threat of the dark man," says Estés, "serves as a warning to all of us—if you don't pay attention to (your) treasures, they will be stolen from you." In a Jungian sense, this is the shadow of the animus, a threatening yet seductive aspect of repressed masculine energy. By confronting it through dreams, therapy, stories, or a combination of all three, a woman recognizes and defeats her Bluebeard. She refuses to become just another corpse in his bloody chamber, and in calling upon her "brothers"—in effect, her animus—she dares Bluebeard and claims his treasures as her own.[4]

Treasure is one of the lures employed by the vengeful ghost or sadistic devil in the ballad "The Demon Lover," also known as "The House Carpenter," "James Harris," "The Daemon Lover," and—in its earliest known appearance among the collection of Samuel Pepys—as a broadside titled *A Warning for Married Women, being an example of Mrs. Jean Reynolds (a West-country woman), born near Plymouth, who, having plighted her troth to a Seaman, was afterward married to a Carpenter, and at last carried away by a Spirit, the manner how shall presently be recited*.[5] This story tells the tale of a woman who leaves her husband and family for a dashing suitor she once knew. In some versions, he's a soldier or sailor named James Harris, killed "Within a forraign land," to whom the heroine pledged undying love or a promise of marriage. When this "spirit in the night" returns to his former love, he tempts her with visions of sailing ships and gold. She gives in, abandoning her husband and child for her lost love. Soon, though, she realizes that he's not the man she once knew. Spotting his cloven hoof, she begins to cry. He taunts her with a vision of the hills of heaven and hell ("*Where you and I shall be*") before sinking the ship "in a flash of fire" or striking "the top-mast with his hand, the fore-mast with his knee." There's no redemption to be found here, only death.

Other heroines fare better when they face their Demon Lovers. Wily Janet wins her beloved Tam Lin by refusing to give in to fear; The Elf-Knight's prey Isabel "lulls him to sleep" before killing him with the knife he'd used to murder "seven king's daughters" before her. The fine lady who runs off with "The Raggle Taggle Gypsies" (aka "Black Jack Davy") chooses to "sleep on the cold, hard ground" rather than return to her old life: like her wild sisters the maenads, she prefers primal Dionysus to the prison of femininity. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* kills her beloved tormentor while mad, dead Catherine haunts hers to his own grave. Transgression and complicity link arms and dance in Demon Lover tales. Such tales might not always end well, but even the worst of them seem better than the bleak lot of the common woman.

In the Brule ghost-tale "Elk-Charmer," an earthly Demon Lover warms his stony heart with the tears of forsaken lovers.

Possessed of good looks and magical flute-song, he had enchanted girls away from their homes and families. But "he wanted only to conquer women," it is said. "After they came to him once, he had no more use for them." Among the people, "he was not well liked." And so, one night he wound up dead. No one knew who killed him. His parents mourned the young man but everyone felt he'd had it coming. Soon afterward, he appeared again, still piping his uncanny music and luring girls away. "I am roaming, roaming, roaming," his restless spirit sings, "And I have to keep on roaming as long as the world stands." A spectral young man in a pale gray blanket, he hovers over the ground, his feet forbidden to touch the earth again. This time out, the Demon Lover's ruin is his own.

The archetypal Demon Lover story is, of course, "Little Red Riding Hood," a tale with countless variations across the world. Like most Demon Lover narratives, though, "Red Riding Hood" has found its deepest popularity in Europe and North America. (Maybe it's that whole "wolf" thing…) In its flattest version, the tale is a simple warning: Girl goes "into the woods," predator sees her, misleads her, and eats her up. If that were all there was to the story, though, it wouldn't pack the punch that "Riding Hood" indisputably has. It would not have been converted to a dark dream of puberty in the company of Angela Carter's *Wolves*, or an empowering revenge-fantasy like Francesca Lia Block's own "Wolf." It couldn't have been spun on its head by Tex Avery's *Red Hot Riding Hood*, in which the Wolf becomes a thrall to sexy, grown-up Red. And it would not have influenced those vampiric initiation tales that, from *Dracula* to *Twilight*, have meant one thing to their male audiences and quite another to their female ones!

"Red Riding Hood" reflects sexual initiation, a confrontation with a voracious male predator who literally consumes her old life while challenging her with a new one. She asks him questions, and he responds with overtures they both know are paradoxically false yet true. In some versions, she is consumed as well; these, though, are not the ones which resonate. The most popular versions of the story have Riding Hood saved by a hunter or woodsman (again, the animus at work), transformed by the encounter into a wild girl herself (as in Carter and Block), redeeming the predator (as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does for both Angel and Spike), or out-wolfing the wolf herself (as does Red Hot Riding Hood). This way, an audience member can have her wolf and eat (or be eaten by) him, too—certainly a more empowering fantasy than mere destruction!

> *What we often call morality is in fact defense… The only morality adequate to the complexities of life is one that has been sculpted in the presence of the shadow.*—Thomas Moore, *Dark Eros: The Imagination of Sadism*

In no guise is the Demon Lover gentle. He's an erotic force of nature. He'll gobble you up like a wolf, drain you dry, and leave you wanting more. He'll compose fantastic symphonies in your honor before killing you, or lead you "over the mountain" and "into the woods." His "teeth do brightly shine." even as he shifts from fox to wolf to stag to devil. As the "Black Man" of witch-hunt sabbat lore, he makes everyone literally kiss his ass. He "may be love's bitch" but at least he's man enough admit it.

So what's up with Edward Cullen? How did we go from Pan, the Nephilim, and Dracula to this shimmering emo-boy? Maybe it's because, like all archetypes, this immortal figure shifts to accommodate his time and culture. And perhaps, in an age of rape drugs and porn sites, celebricults and pro-anorexia propaganda, our whole *world* has become a Demon Lover… and in that world, the real transgression is to *care*.

Edward Cullen cares about his paramour. Cares enough to avoid her, save her, challenge his own nature, and risk the loss of immortality. Unlike the Demon Lovers who fill our daily lives, he's willing to *defy what he's supposed to be* in order to *become better through the power of love*. Yes, he's a predator—a safer one than the world around him! He's the animus protector for millions of young women, and if he seems feeble in comparison to, say, Dracula, then maybe it's because so many of them have to be strong in their day-to-day lives.

In stories, the protagonist assumes an audience proxy role. Through that character, the audience vicariously lives the tale. And in *Twilight*, Bella Swan becomes a cipher, a blank screen onto which fans can project themselves. There, Edward both tempts and protects. He stops onrushing SUVs and hormones alike in their tracks. He's the Bad Boy who cares enough about you to be good for a change. In our world, that's no small thing. For millions of *Twilight* fans, it's potent medicine for a sickening age.

As archetypes, the Demon Lover and the Temptress challenge us to recognize the shadow we crave both in mates and in ourselves. They inspire us to break rules, act carelessly, even spit in the face of our gods. They warn us of the costs of transgression, but make that transgression look so damned good we're tempted to go there anyway. Maybe in that process, we might become whole, even on the edge of an abyss. We may perish, but at least we won't be left wondering what it was we might have missed.

> *No sentient being in this world is allowed to remain innocent forever. In order for us to thrive, our own instructive nature drives us to face the fact that things are not as they seem. The wild creative function pushes us to learn about the many states of being, perception, and knowing… There, sometimes for the first time in our lives we have a chance to cease walking into walls of our making, and learn to pass through them instead.* —Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*

Footnotes

[1]Citing *USA Today*.

[2]While many "vampire traditionalists" howl because Edward doesn't burst into flames around daylight, that vampiric allergy to sunshine is not itself "traditional." The trope appeared in 1922, when F.W. Murnau employed it as visual drama at the climax of his film *Nosferatu*. Before that, vampires might be weaker by day but could still, like Stoker's Dracula, walk around in it without combusting.

[3]Vain Narcissus, who lost himself in his own reflection; and Psyche, who endured a rather dysfunctional relationship with Eros.

[4]This is, by the way, a very late-20th century interpretation of Bluebeard-type stories. Earlier interpretations just saw the heroine as some nosy chick who needed to be rescued by the good guys.

[5]The tale's familiar name has been

attributed to Sir Walter Scott.

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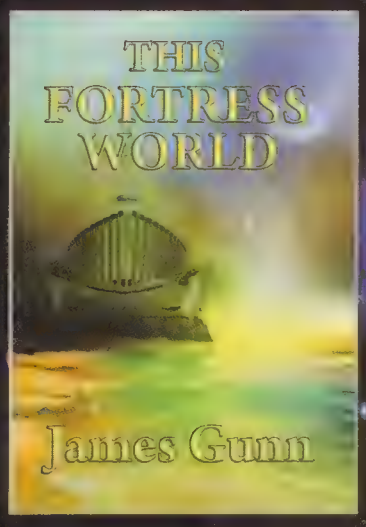

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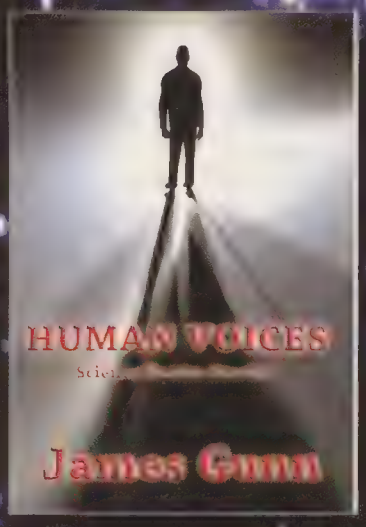

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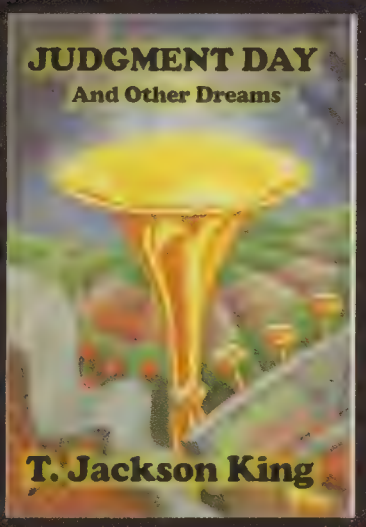

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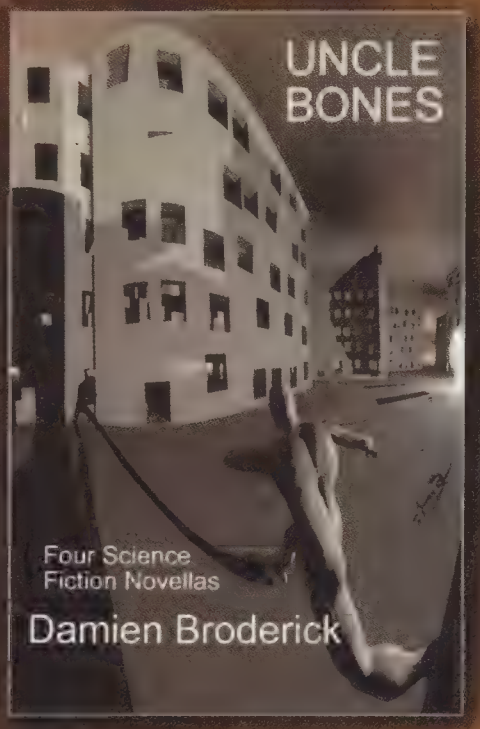

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Stories of the Sand

by Dirk Strasser
Illustrated by Carol Heyer

If we seek forgiveness and understanding we should look not inside ourselves but outside.

The sands started speaking to us on our eighth morning in the Red Desert. At first it was a soft lisp of air and heat, but as the day progressed, the sounds coalesced into ghost-words that danced on the cusp of meaning. I'm sure I was the one who heard them first. I looked around at my three companions, searching for a sign that the murmurs were a portent that we were closer to our goal, rather than proof that I was falling into heat-madness.

My gaze traced the tether behind my camel to Shemselnar, who was sitting unresponsive as ever on her mount. Her slight body seemed even smaller against the vast red ocean of sand behind her, and as usual, it pained me to look at her. Impulsively, I locked my eyes onto the two empty sockets where hers should have been. Why didn't I feel I was looking at her until I saw those two empty pools? Wouldn't it make as much sense to stare at the soft waves of her brown hair or her unlined forehead or her tapered hands? They were all Shemselnar. What was it about the eyes that commanded they be the center of being? *Oh Shemselnar.* I felt my body succumb to a shudder. *Surely you can hear the sand-voices? Show me in some way that you have.*

As always, there was no sign, and I looked away, unable to bear it.

If the pilgrim Rathekin had heard the sands whispering around us, then he did not give the slightest indication. He was sitting on his camel with his unnaturally erect back, his crimson robes and gloves covering any exposed skin, and his hood holding his face in constant shadow. It seemed impossible that he could ride the rhythm of his beast with such a posture, and the heat under his clothing must have been unbearable, yet somehow he endured the long days without toppling to the ground. And there he was, as he had been from the start, rigid in a landscape of flowing dune-curves under a delicately shimmering sky of fragile blue.

Jaliyya also bore the journey stoically. Her wine-dark skin beaded with silvery sweat soon after sunrise, and I knew her whole body would be bathed in a moist film by midday. Even now, on the eighth day, I was still drawn by the custom of her people, the Akkur, of riding naked. At first I tried not to allow my curiosity to show, not wanting my inexperience with desert people to be too obvious, but the days became so unbearable that I found Jaliyya's drenched skin to be a lodestone that drew my eyes to her. This time she turned, as if aware that I had been looking at her.

"Yes, Semchur, I hear the sands," she said, opening her second eyelids so that the piercing silver of her irises bore through me. "We are close to the rymlands."

I nodded. They say my people, the Sakhr, originally came from the Red Desert, long ago migrating east to the rain regions. Hearing the sand-voices perhaps meant I was beginning to sense this skein of tribal memory, yet I still felt as alien to the landscape as the ocean. I knew that the Akkur were truly a deep-desert people, in harmony with the landscape as camels and dune-wolves, and as the shahin and hurr that circled impossibly high overhead.

Jaliyya's voice gusted from her mouth like sand-blown wind, stinging with intensity. "Soon you will no longer have the choice of turning around and heading back to the Rains," she said.

I could barely hold her silver gaze. "I made that decision long ago," I said. Then turning to our hooded companion: "Rathekin, do also you hear the sands speaking?"

"I hear them, Semchur." The sound of his voice emerged like an echo.

What was Rathekin's purpose for seeking the rymlands? He had given nothing away. I could barely see the glint of his eyes under the hood, and he carried his words with the stilted tones of someone unused to speaking. He left it in no doubt that he was paying Jaliyya well—better than I was—and I prayed from the onset that our quests would not conflict before our journey was over.

"You can both help me now," said Jaliyya. "Either of you may be more attuned to the sands than I am. It is a talent you are born with that only needs to be awoken. There's no reason why my skills would be greater than yours. Listen carefully. Tell me if you hear the words becoming clearer or fainter."

"But you have claimed to know the way to the rymlands," said Rathekin. "I hope you haven't taken my money under false pretences."

Jaliyya shook her head, and beads of sweat flew from her dark skin in a flurry of silver rain. "The rymlands are not a place like the Red Desert or the Rains. There is only one way to find them. Listen to the sand-voices. They will tell you."

So we continued to listen through the fiery heat of the day as the heat-shimmers washed over us and the rust-red dunes grew to the sky. Even our camels began to protest—braying, and balking at the sight of yet another mountain of sand, but we urged them on, knowing that the time for rest was not yet upon us.

And finally, as the sun sank into the twilight, there was a brief respite before the aching cold of the desert night would settle into our bones. Jaliyya signaled it was time to make camp. Unlike the previous nights, she had not found a water source, but there was enough sedge-scrub to provide the camels with the moisture they needed. After they had eaten their fill, she hobbled them and joined us around the fire.

I cradled Shemselnar's eyeless head in my arms as I did every night, and as always, she neither resisted my gesture, nor reciprocated it in any way. She had taken the meal of berry tea and dried dates from me in silence, with the sand-voices a murmur in the clear desert air.

"Can any of you distinguish the words yet?" asked Rathekin, who as usual remained hooded, even at night.

"I can hear the words," I said, "but they seem to be speaking a foreign tongue. I think I could imitate the sound. Jaliyya, do you know their language?"

The dark-skinned Akkur laughed, wrapping her blanket tightly around her body. "The sands speak all tongues. First you hear a jumble of sounds, then something that sounds like another language. Eventually it will make sense, but the accent will sound foreign to you, and then finally the sand will speak to you in a familiar voice—at least this is how it happens if we are on the right path."

"Now that we are so close," I said, "will you tell us more of what you know of the rymlands?"

Jaliyya sighed. "I have entered them five times, and each time was different. The other Akkur who have breached them and returned to tell their tales have reported many things that I did not remember seeing. The rymlands taunt your memory and shape-shift inside your head."

"But there must be something more you can say that will prepare us," said Rathekin.

"The rymlands are a place of lost things," said Jaliyya. "We all know that. That's why you are seeking them. I think we may have more chance of success if instead of trying to grasp the shifting sands of the rymlands, you tell me exactly what it is each of you wants to find there."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"You want to hear our stories?" I asked.

"I am paying you enough not to have to tell you mine," said Rathekin.

"True," said Jaliyya, "but, Semchur, you are not paying me nearly enough, I think." Both her sets of eyelids were now wide open, and her irises gleamed silver in the firelight.

My heart started racing, and I stroked Shemselnar's hair to try to calm myself.

"She's your daughter, isn't she?" asked Jaliyya.

I nodded, and a tear came to rest on my cheek. "Shemselnar is my daughter."

"There is no need for Semchur to tell us his tale," said Rathekin.

"No… I want to tell it," I said, stroking her forehead, but as always, unable to lower my touch to her bare eye sockets. "Shemselnar was not always like this." I swallowed. "She had the most beautiful eyes when she was first born, and as she grew, she would sing with a beauty that matched the intensity of her eyes. Everyone was enchanted by the sound of her voice and the liveliness of her spirit. My race, the Sakhr, prize singing and poetry above all else, for we are a civilized people, and when Shemselnar sang for others, she lifted their yearnings to great heights."

I paused, and looked at the face of my daughter, gaunt and expressionless in the firelight, and still saw a trace of what she had once been.

"What happened?" asked Jaliyya softly.

"What happens when the most precious thing to you is attacked? You lose yourself in madness, don't you? Well… those who are weak do."

"I… I don't understand," said Jaliyya.

I continued my story. "Shemselnar would enchant particularly the fair-faced young Sakhr men. She would sing to them, and they would each feel she was singing to them alone. And as her voice caressed their ears, it seemed to them that she was declaring undying love. As I said, my people, the Sakhr, are a civilized people. We have laws and we enforce them. We have urges and we seek to control them. But for one of the young men, the one fairest of face, whose cursed name was Mendakar, the declaration of love he felt he heard from Shemselnar was too powerful, her song too beautiful and undying, and he came to her in the night and could not control his urges."

I felt more tears in the corners of my eyes, but blinked them away. "Shemselnar called out in the darkness, and I heard her. I ran to the sound of her voice and saw what Mendakar was doing to her. And then… and then I took my sword and tore into his back. Countless times. In my madness, I wanted him to die."

"Did you kill him?" asked Jaliyya.

"No. I injured him badly, but he recovered, and was punished."

Jaliyya frowned. "But what happened to your daughter? Her eyes?"

I swallowed. "It is our law. We are a just people. I was punished."

"But you were defending your daughter, and your defense of her did not kill the attacker. There are desert tribes that would say it was your *duty* to kill him."

"The Sakhr do not believe in the desert justice. We are civilized."

"So, Semchur, how did your Rains civilization and justice bring you and your daughter here?"

I continued to stroke Shemselnar's forehead. "I was wrong to attack Mendakar with my sword. I was wrong. I should have pulled him away and allowed our justice to deal with him. I raised a weapon against a Sakhr. There is no worse crime. For us, the punishment must hurt the guilty—the guilty must be eternally reminded of what they have done. For the worst crime imaginable, there is the worst punishment imaginable."

"What did your people do to you? What was your punishment?"

"Don't you see, Jaliyya? Look at her. *They took my daughter's eyes*."

"What? That is punishing *her*. Your people are mad."

"They are *just* above all else."

"You call this justice?"

"Yes, the Sakhr call it justice. There could be no worse punishment than for our sages to hurt my daughter."

"Why not *you?* Why not take your eyes?"

"The sages looked into my soul—they always look into your soul at judgment—and they knew that nothing they could do to me would make me regret my actions in protecting Shemselnar. They had to show me that my actions were the opposite of protecting her. Their judgment was to harm her so that I would be made to feel the guilt… and they were right."

Jaliyya simply stared for a moment at Shemselnar lying cradled in my arms. "But a blind person is not a dead person," she said finally. "Shemselnar seems to have died in all but breath."

"Yes, from the moment Shemselnar's eyes were taken, she has not uttered a single word. She has never sung again."

Jaliyya wrapped the blanket more tightly around her. "Rathekin, do your people do this too? Are they also civilized? Is this what they would also call justice?"

"I do not talk of my people," he said flatly. He had sat in silence during my tale and was obviously not prepared to add his thoughts.

Jaliyya looked back at me. "Semchur," she said, "did your sages expect Shemselnar's mind to close as it has after the punishment?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. The punishment was for me, and it was the right punishment."

"And what was your daughter's crime?"

"None. She committed no crime. The rightful punishment of the guilty one is all that matters to the Sakhr."

Jaliyya's silver irises bore through me. "So the lost thing you seek in the rymlands is your daughter's eyes?"

I shuddered. "That is what I seek for Shemselnar. Perhaps… I seek something else for myself."

> And the deeper we journeyed into this strangest of places, the richer the colors became.

As we all sat in silence, the sand-voices seemed to become clearer, the words more distinct. I strained to make sense of them. What were they telling me? My thoughts shimmered in a haze of fear, regrets and anticipation, and sometime late in the desert night, I fell asleep.

The next day, the sands spoke to us with increasing intensity, while still remaining incomprehensible to me.

"I can hear their words," announced Rathekin shortly before midday.

"Words in a strange tongue?" asked Jaliyya.

"No, I understand some of them," said the pilgrim in his strange echolike voice.

Jaliyya lifted her second eyelids in surprise. "Then, you must be very close to finding what you are seeking already. You should be the one to show the way to the rymlands."

"There," said Rathekin, his gloved hand pointing to a depression in the sand ahead to our left. "I can see the ground moving as if it were a reflection in the water."

"Are you certain it's not just heat haze?" I asked.

"No," said Jaliyya, "Rathekin is right. This is how I've seen the border in the past." She pulled out her camel stick. "We will need to urge the camels at speed. If we are too slow, we will fail to breach the border, and will need to continue our search for another way in."

I pulled out my camel stick and glanced back at Shemselnar's mount still tethered behind me.

Jaliyya motioned us to bring our camels in line with hers. "Match my speed," she said. "Remember, *khalis* is the Akkur command for speed. Are you ready?"

Rathekin and I nodded, our camel sticks poised.

"Now!" she cried. "Khalis!" And she struck her beast's flanks sharply.

"Khalis!" I cried immediately, mimicking her actions, and striking both my camel and Shemselnar's.

Despite the heat and the strain of the journey so far, our camels broke into a gallop, and we reached the depression Rathekin had pointed to in full flight.

Though I am considered a poet by my people, it is difficult to describe what it is like entering the rymlands. When storms hit the rain regions, it is like a grey curtain has been lowered in all directions, dulling the shapes and colors, and shrinking the depth of what you can see. The best I can say is that entering the rymlands is the reverse of this, where it seems a grey curtain has been lifted, and you are suddenly aware that what is around you has more distinct shapes and richer colors than before, and there

is much that had been hidden from view which now appears clearly all around.

Thus we entered the rymlands.

And the deeper we journeyed into this strangest of places, the richer the colors became. At first the landscape was still one of mountainous dunes, but that was where the similarity to the Red Desert ended. The sand had transformed into a multitude of hues, all wavering and flickering like light on trembling water. And as the sun arced across the heavens, the colors burned into still deeper shades, and merged and danced as if they were living things.

The sands continued to speak, louder than before, but still—it seemed to me—in a foreign tongue, and there was much else that drew my fascination. In the sky, cloud wisps flew like birds of prey, forever riding the currents and circling overhead.

"Are they alive, Jaliyya?" I asked, nervously shifting in my saddle as I stared upwards.

"Everything is alive here," she said. "The long-dead things, the never-dead things, the things that *should* be dead. That's why you've come, isn't it?"

We rode on. Our camels plodded along as always, apparently oblivious to the changes around us.

"Do our beasts not see what we are seeing?" I asked Jaliyya.

She shrugged. "I think, as with my people, their inner eyelids shield them a little. When I open mine, the power of what I see is almost unbearable."

Turning to Rathekin, I asked, "Does your hood also shield you?"

The pilgrim answered in his distant voice without shifting from his rigid riding position. "How do I know what you see? How do you know what I see? Can you create visions with words?"

"I think a poet can."

"I think poets delude themselves."

As I contemplated a response, increasing strangeness crowded me. Do you breathe in the rymlands as you do elsewhere? I don't know. It seems to me that you at least breathe more slowly, that less air is needed to sustain you.

The cloud wisps were flying closer to the ground now, and appeared to be circling us like shahin before a kill. I drew my sword.

Jaliyya laughed. "Do you think you can mortally wound clouds? Save your weapon for the things we can fight. There will be enough of those later."

"What are these flying creatures?" I asked.

"The Akkur call them *nemrils*, which in our tongue means memory feeders."

"Memory feeders?"

"Yes. There is not much you can do when they attack, which they will day and night. They will settle on your head and feed from your memories."

"What? You seem calm about the prospect, Jaliyya." I eyed the circling wisps nervously.

"I wasn't the first time, but they will leave you once they are sated. And they seem to attack the unpleasant memories first, so you are left with a trace that isn't quite as painful. Of course, if we are in the rymlands too long, then they will start to feed on the memories that are vital to our survival, and those we do not wish to lose. There are stories of Akkur remaining eternally in the rymlands because they have forgotten that there is any other place."

I shuddered as a nemril swooped towards me. Instinctively, I slashed my sword at it, but the blade simply passed through the cloud. I waved my other hand through it as it hovered above my head, but to no avail. Slowly it settled around the top of my head, and I felt a soft feathering, but then nothing but the faintest of pressure. I ran fingers through my hair to try to dislodge it, but the faint pressure remained, so although I couldn't see it anymore, I assumed it was there and was feeding.

Looking across the other end of the tether rope at Shemselnar, I saw she too had a nemril settled on her head. What unpleasant memory would it be attacking? Perhaps the pain of having her eyes removed would fade a little. Or would her worst memory be of a father who had failed her?

My thoughts attacked me relentlessly, until night finally came after a long, multihued twilight. Unlike the Red Desert, where the sun dipped abruptly and the sands were plunged into a sudden darkness, here the sun seemed to dance above the horizon, taunting the land as if it were playing a child's game. And as the orb finally allowed the horizon to capture it, the sands started to sing. Though I could not comprehend their words, I could feel the strength of their song and their haunting, lilting tone. Yet, as soon as they began their mournful sweep through me, I felt them fade, as if carried away into the distance by some swift-moving beast, and I gasped at the sudden loss.

The rymland night was a thing to behold. Above us was a canopy of vermilion stars unlike any I had seen before. They

I shuddered as a nemril swooped towards me. Instinctively, I slashed my sword at it, but the blade simply passed through the cloud.

burned like angry flames on the dark canvas, and when I wasn't looking seemed to shift to form new constellations.

"How can you find your way here when the stars play games with you?" I asked Jaliyya.

"It is impossible to navigate in the rymlands," she said. "The only way to find what you are looking for here is through the sands."

"I heard their song," I said, "but I still couldn't understand the words—and now everything is silent."

"Hopefully, your time will come," she said, as she prepared the camp fire. "The voices will return in the morning."

"We haven't lost any of the day's heat yet. Do we need a fire tonight?"

Jaliyya smiled. "Oh, we *do* need a fire at night here. It gives us our only protection from the rymbeasts." The flames started to reach upward. "And there is also something else that is strange about this place. Here, come closer."

I approached the flames, and to my amazement, felt a wave of cold from them.

"You will need to stay close to survive the night," said Jaliyya.

We were all huddled close to the cold blaze, Shemselnar's head resting in my lap, when the first rymbeasts appeared. Some seemed like misshapen wolves, others like shimmering silver wildcats, while still others appeared to be giant rats whose tails slithered and coiled like snakes as they prowled in the shadows just beyond our firelight. All of them circled us in silence, staring at us with eyes that seemed to carry their own light, rather than merely reflect our flames.

"Why are they silent?" I whispered. "It is unnerving."

"I don't know. Perhaps it is out of reverence for the sands. They say, though, the beasts are not silent when they feed."

My head started to feel light, and the grotesque parade started to blur. The head of one, impossibly, joined onto the body of another, snouts suddenly appeared where tails had been.

"What are they, Jaliyya?" I asked. "Phantoms?"

"The Akkur think these are beasts that have forgotten what they once were. All that is left is a taste for flesh and a fear of flames, so they endlessly circle campfires until dawn."

"Let us hope they do not forget their fear of flames."

"So, are they real?" asked Rathekin.

"Are you?" asked Jaliyya. "Here in the rymlands, their fangs will pierce our skin and their claws shred our flesh. That makes them real to me."

I shifted a little closer to the fire, willing myself not to look at the beasts. To my horror, their eyes appeared reflected in the flames, looking directly at me. I tried closing my eyes, but there they were again, behind my eyelids, glaring deep into my head.

My mind was wavering in its sanity when my gaze finally came to rest on Shemselnar's face. Was she asleep? It was impossible to be certain without her eyes being there, but her breathing was low and steady. I felt a sudden calm wash over me.

I must have fallen asleep in my sitting position, because that's how I awoke when the sun's rays pricked my face.

As the sand-voices filled my ears again, the first thing I saw was that a nemril had settled on Shemselnar's head during the night. I tried to brush it away, but my efforts were as futile as they had been the day before. I guessed from the faint pressure sensation on my head that another nemril was also feeding from my memories.

Jaliyya urged us to move quickly once we had broken camp. Our camels were protesting loudly by midmorning, obviously starting to feel the strain of the strange landscape.

"We must stay even closer to each other," said Jaliyya. "If we lose sight of each other deep in the rymlands, we could remain lost forever."

I shortened the tether to Shemselnar's mount. As we continued, the terrain changed subtly at first. The dunes seemed uneven, gaining bumps and extra depressions where once there had been only a gently rippling surface. By the time the sun was at its zenith, the unevenness had transformed into clearly defined shapes, and half-human sand monstrosities leered at us from above.

Late afternoon, the giant creatures took grotesque forms whose voices joined the sand chorus all around us. One reached out a clawed hand, and Jaliyya swept her sword across it so that it fell in a shower of fine grains.

"Don't let them grasp hold of you," she cried. "Or they will drag you under the dunes."

I swung my sword at another giant hand that was reaching towards me. Rathekin, too, was arcing his sword at an attacker. Soon we were under siege, and the sand creatures were attacking us from all directions. Jaliyya flashed her sword furiously, and it seemed we were under an eternal curtain of sand as the creatures collapsed under our blades. I pulled Shemselnar's camel still closer to me, chopping at a grasping claw.

"This way!" shouted Jaliyya, urging her camel to go faster.

She appeared little more than a shadow through the rain of sand around us, but I managed to keep up with her. Grains coated my lungs, making it impossible to breathe. I heard a scream. Was that Shemselnar? No, that was impossible.

Finally, we left the attackers behind, and emerged from the blur of sand into clear air. We stood on a high ridge, and below us lay a vast plain shrouded in a pulsating cloud that stretched towards an immeasurably distant horizon.

"Is this what we've been looking for?" I asked.

Jaliyya laughed, her silver eyes shining in the clear air. "This is where you will find what you've lost—if what you have lost still exists in some form."

"What do we do now?" asked Rathekin.

"You do what you came here for. Come. This is where we

On and on the mist-river took us, or raced past us, or changed us—it was impossible to tell which.

truly meet the strangeness of the rymlands. From now on we will truly no longer be able to agree on what we see. You will need to be your own guides in what you seek, but stay close to me if you want to find your way back."

I drew a deep breath, and followed Jaliyya down the ridge towards the shrouded plain. As we drew closer, our camels started braying and fighting against their reins, and several paces before the mist line, they simply stopped and refused to continue.

I pulled out my camel stick, but Jaliyya held up her hand. "Wait a moment," she said. "Look to the sky."

I glanced up, and saw a flock of nemrils descending towards us. This time they settled on the camels' heads as well as ours.

"Our beasts will soon forget their fears," said Jaliyya.

"And what about us?" I asked.

"We won't have such good fortune, Semchur. We can feel many things at once. Our minds are not as simple as a camel's," she said, half-smiling. "Even if some of us are less civilized than others."

I watched the undulating cloud below. My thoughts seemed to pulse with the seething mass. What were these nemrils doing to my mind? Could Jaliyya be trusted, if they had been feeding on her memory every time she had ventured into the rymlands? Could I trust anything anymore?

After a time I couldn't measure, Jaliyya gave the command, and we entered the shroud. The moment my head submerged, it felt as if we had entered a swift-flowing river that was pushing us relentlessly forwards. Our camels appeared to be walking, and yet, simultaneously, I was engulfed by the sensation that we were being rushed along by an irresistible current. I was no longer breathing—I was certain of that—and there was no longer any need to.

Staccato things flashed past my vision, human things—faces, arms, legs, torsos—and half-human and inhuman things, twisted impossible things that had almost-teeth and almost-eyes and almost-hands.

On and on the mist-river took us, or raced past us, or changed us—it was impossible to tell which. To my surprise, Shemselnar's head wasn't slumped in passive resignation as it always was. It darted around in all directions—right, left, above, below—constantly jerking into new positions.

She can see, I thought. Though her eye sockets remained as empty as ever.

Shemselnar! I tried to call her name, but the sound was absorbed into the cloud.

Jaliyya was still just up ahead. We were matching her pace precisely. She, too, was agitated, looking all around at the passing procession of the human and the grotesque.

Where was Rathekin? I couldn't see him. Had we lost the pilgrim, or had he chosen to leave?

Who was that?

A face leered directly at me through the shroud, and vanished as we surged past. It looked familiar. Was my mind playing tricks?

The mists swirled. I wanted to call for help, but somehow couldn't remember how to move my mouth. A mutilated face appeared, its nose and cheeks open wounds, and I tried to close my eyes, but found I couldn't.

Help me. What's happening?

Shemselnar. Are you all right?

My voice had evaporated.

My head was fading into the mist. An insane thought. How could…

The river of cloud rushed through my ears. I need to breathe… I need…

Nothing.

Nothing.

Something.

I heard the sound of waves merging with the babble of the sands. Spears of sunlight pierced through my eyelids, and I opened them slowly. My eyes took a while to adjust to the clarity of the light.

I was lying on a beach of pure white sand. The blue-green waters of an ocean danced tantalizingly close to my feet. Our camels were feeding on some bushes on a low ridge on the edge of the shore, and not far from me lay Shemselnar and Jaliyya, nemrils still feeding on their heads.

I tried to move, but my limbs carried the weight of a thousand stones. Jaliyya started to stir, and as she did, the nemrils released their grip from both her and Shemselnar, and drifted away as if bloated and sated. Moments later, I felt a gentle lightness in my own head, and saw another nemril leave me to join the others. I watched their path until they were so high in the stark blue sky that I could no longer see them.

Jaliyya was looking at me. I started to speak, surprised that my lips now seemed to be moving as I wanted them to. "Where are we?" I asked, my voice rasping from the back of my throat.

Jaliyya frowned. "We're back in the Red Desert. Can't you see? Did you find what you were looking for?"

I pushed myself up into a sitting position, my elbows aching. "What are you saying? We're on a beach. There's an ocean before us. Look."

"An ocean? I've never seen an ocean," said Jaliyya. "Where is it?"

"Are you mad? There, you're looking directly at it."

Jaliyya shook her head and sat up. "I see dunes. I'm lying on sand here. We're all lying on sand. We're back in the Red Desert. Surely you can see? Nothing is moving. There are no nemrils. Nothing."

"The nemrils were on our heads until just before you awoke. And look," I scooped up a handful of sand and let it slip through my fingers in front of her, "the grains here are white, bone white, not red."

Jaliyya looked at my open hand in silence for a moment. "One of has emerged from the rymlands with a madness. The sand is red. Over there are dunes. We have been returned to the desert."

I pointed to the ridge where the camels were feeding. "Yes, I agree there are dunes in that direction—perhaps you have lost your sense of color. But there… you must be able to see." I pointed in the other direction. "There is the most beautiful green-blue ocean."

"No," said Jaliyya, shaking her head. "It appears I have returned, but you have not."

"Yet we are together. How is this possible?"

"I can't explain the rymlands, Semchur."

"So, are Shemselnar and I lost here?"

"Perhaps, but it appears more likely you haven't found what you seek, and the rymlands haven't released you yet."

I got slowly to my feet. "Where is Rathekin?"

"Who?"

My feet buckled, but I kept my balance. "The pilgrim. The hooded one. Rathekin."

"Was this an apparition you saw in the rymlands?"

"No, no. Don't toy with me. He was with us from start of the journey. He paid a considerable sum to join us. *Rathekin.* Perhaps it wasn't his true name, but don't say that you cannot remember him."

Jaliyya's two sets of eyelids blinked furiously. "There was no fourth member on our quest. I have been guiding only you and your daughter."

"But… but…" My voice trailed into nothing as I realized I could see only three camels feeding on the bushes. Rathekin was lost in the cloud-river. The nemrils must have eaten Jaliyya's memory of him. That was the only explanation.

I walked over to Jaliyya and held out my hand to help her get to her feet. Our hands touched, and I felt the softness of her dark-wine skin.

"Neither of us appear to be phantoms," I said.

"True," said Jaliyya, her eyes gleaming silver.

I turned and walked over to where Shemselnar lay. She was still breathing steadily. I ran my fingers along her cheek, and then touched the empty sockets of her eyelids for the first time. She seemed to stir for a moment, but then her steady breathing resumed.

I looked up and saw a camel rider silhouetted against the sun, coming towards us. I drew a sharp breath.

It was the hooded figure of Rathekin.

"There," I cried to Jaliyya. "There is Rathekin, just as I described him."

Jaliyya looked in the direction I was pointing, shielding her eyes from the direct sun's rays and blinking. "I can't see anything."

I watched in silence as the pilgrim approached me and dismounted from his camel.

"You survived the rymlands, pilgrim Rathekin," I said.

"No, Semchur, I have not survived."

"But you are here."

"We are in different places, you and I. I won't be returning." The glint of his eyes was all I could see under the shadow of his hood.

"Have you found what you lost, Rathekin?"

"No, but I will."

"What is it? Can you tell me your story now?"

"Some of us have no stories—only misfortune. Listen to the sands if you want to hear my tale. I can no longer pretend I am what I once was."

With that, Rathekin pulled back his hood to reveal a face so horrifically scarred that it could barely be called a face anymore. His mouth had collapsed in on itself and two openings remained where his nose once had been. It was as if his skin had been scoured, deep rivulets ran down both cheeks and flesh hung loosely in each furrow. Only his eyes seemed untouched, and they stared at me, sad and resigned.

"How… how did this happen to you?"

"You don't know, Semchur? You still don't know? Listen to the sands, for I have given myself to them now."

Suddenly, the sand-voices started to make sense to me, and I could hear them tell Rathekin's story.

Do you still not know who I am? Are you as blind as your daughter? I am Mendakar, who in his youth could not control his ardour for Shemselnar. I was once fair of face, but that was brought to an end by the justice of the Sakhr. Did you not know what my punishment was? Were you too caught up in your own grief? You should have guessed. What greater punishment could there have been for my crime than to take my fair face from me?

Mendakar's contorted mouth hadn't moved as the words floated through the air into my ears. He now took off his robes and started to walk towards Shemselnar. As he turned his bare back, I could see the blade wounds I had inflicted still etched there.

"What are you doing, Mendakar?" I cried, running towards him.

Do you think I choose to repeat my crime? Even now, you cannot think of any grief other than your own.

Mendakar bent over the prostrate form of Shemselnar.

"Stop it. Leave her." I grasped at him, but my hand passed through his flesh.

Mendakar lowered his mutilated face towards Shemselnar's while I tried desperately to pull him back, flailing at nothingness.

I reached for my sword and swung it back, ready to lunge at the apparition, when the sand-voices again spoke Mendakar's words.

I paused.

Shemselnar, forgive me. I give you the last link I have to my life.

The voice spoke sadly and truly, and when Mendakar lifted his head from Shemselnar's, I could see what he had done.

He had given her his eyes.

And with the light of recognition starting to burn from Shemselnar's irises, the sands began to sing.

They sang with voices as pure as the rains and as clear as a desert morning. They sang of loss and yearning, of bitter sweetness and sweet bitterness. They sang of homelands far away and the lights of countless hearth fires burning gently in the night. They sang of the soon-to-be-past and the never-to-be-future. They sang of the twilight of morning and the dawn of eve. And as the notes reached a crescendo, Shemselnar lifted her eyes heavenward and she, too, began to sing.

And when my daughter had finished her song, she came to me, smiling.

"Where are we, father?" she asked. "I have been dreaming strange dreams."

I held her for a long time, weeping, and then looked up. We were back in the Red Desert, and Jaliyya was standing, holding the reins of our three camels.

I turned towards the lowering sun and thought for a moment I could see the shadow of someone riding on the crest of a dune.

A Road Once Traveled

by Richard Parks

Illustrated by Tiffany Prothero

With age comes wisdom, but what good is wisdom without someone to instruct?

When John Sinterhill reached his fifty-sixth year, he resolved to seek his fortune. He spent several long winter nights with his sewing awl and leather until he had created a serviceable rucksack. When spring came he left his farm near Lattice-on-Byrne and took to the road, a stout cudgel in his hand. Before he left he deeded his farm to a distant cousin for next to nothing since this was what, in John's considered opinion, the place was worth.

There were two roads leading from Lattice-on-Byrne: one ran north and the other, south. The road to the north was far more traveled. The southern road, by contrast, was little more than a trail, used more often by hunters and herdsmen than proper travelers.

"What is the point," he asked himself, "of seeking one's fortune where everyone else in creation has done the same? Surely there can not be much left in the north by now."

On the road to the south, however, the prospects were less clear and thus, in John's opinion, the potential was far greater. He took the southern road. He had traveled no more than a few days when he came to a river. Crossing the river was a rather well-maintained bridge, in an area where, John was reasonably certain, there were no farms or villages. In truth he had seen none of either once he'd gotten more than a day's journey from Lattice-on-Byrne. He smiled to himself.

"Ah, so that's the way of things, is it?"

John walked across the bridge. There was a troll waiting for him on the other side. While John had never seen a troll before, he knew that bridges in isolated places and trolls went together, and so this must indeed be one. The creature was perhaps a head shorter than he was but easily twice as wide, hairy, thickly muscled, with curling tusks, and it carried an iron cudgel of such size that it made John's own club look like kindling.

"Did ye think ye would cross my bridge without paying my toll?"

"Did you think you'd be entitled to such a toll without a proper declaration?" John asked, without even blinking.

The creature frowned, which did not improve its appearance to any great degree. "What d'ye mean?"

John sighed. "I mean this may be a wilderness, but it still falls under the Earldom of Kindun, and the Laws of Road and Market apply—all tolls must be clearly marked with proper signage, approved by His Grace's shire reeve, and a percentage of the proceeds surrendered twice a year. I trust your papers are in order?"

"Papers? D'ye think I'm a dog? I'm a *troll*, ye dolt, and I'm going to eat your tender flesh for my payment! Do ye think His Grace wants a cut of that?"

"Ah. Pardon me, then. I thought you were a businessman, not a thief and murderer. But surely this bridge is a lot of work for such a flimsy pretense? You could just attack and eat anyone who came by."

The creature leaned on its cudgel. "There are traditions to uphold. One is that trolls build bridges to entice travelers. Another is that we eat those travelers. I know my true place."

John sighed again. "Well, as a man who can't say the same, I would not disparage your customs. I'm merely seeking my

"I'm a princess. I've been enchanted. If you break the spell, I'll marry you."

fortune, and it appears to be my fortune to encounter you. Though I can't say my flesh is all that tender at my age."

The troll hesitated. "Did ye say 'seeking your fortune'?"

"I did."

"But you're old," the troll said. "No offense."

John shrugged. "Why should I take offense? It's the truth."

The troll sounded puzzled. "I've encountered men seeking their fortunes before. They were always young and tasty. Ye appear to be neither. Why would you leave hearth and home now?"

"Because those young men had the whole matter exactly backwards," John said. "And you've just made my point: seeking one's fortune is dangerous and uncertain. It's very well to say you should do it while young, but the chances are realistically that all you're going to find is a troll like yourself or a bandit or some other circumstance that ends your travels before the goal is reached, and there's your life wasted."

The troll admitted that this was often the case, and John continued, "Whereas someone like me has already had his share of life. I've had a wife and a position in the community of sorts. I worked hard for everything I had, but that was little enough. My good wife died of a fever last spring, and I have no children to care for or to care for me. There's nothing left for me now but more hard work until my body breaks entirely, and then how will I live? If I make my fortune, then my twilight years can be spent at ease. Or if, as seems likely now, I get eaten by a troll, then again I need not worry about tomorrow. Honestly, my time of life is the best time for a man to seek his fortune, and I'd recommend it to anyone. Trolls notwithstanding."

"You're mad," the troll said. "Completely daft."

"I don't think so," John said, "but I admit the possibility."

"If I eat ye, I may become mad too."

John sighed. "Unfortunately for us both, there's only one way to find out for sure."

Fortunately for John, the troll was not inclined to test the matter. He settled for a piece of dried meat from John's rucksack, but otherwise seemed glad to see the back of him. John continued on his quest.

The southern road did not get any more hospitable the further John traveled. The forests grew thicker, and several times he saw what appeared to be some sort of large animal shadowing him through the trees. He considered that coming this way might have been a mistake, but he didn't feel like testing his luck with the troll a second time. He kept going. On the evening of the seventh day, he made camp in a small clearing and kept close to the fire. A pair of red eyes stared at him from the forest, and the only comfort John could take was that there was only one pair. A pack of hungry wolves had seemed more likely, but other than this one creature, he had seen precious few animals along the road he traveled.

John made a supper of hard biscuit and barley tea, and all the while the red eyes were watching him.

"Well, I'll have to sleep soon," he said aloud, "so if you're planning on eating me, I'd wait till then if I were you."

Instead, the creature moved into the firelight, almost as if responding to his words. It wasn't a wolf or bear, but rather a large red fox vixen, which then proceeded to sit down on its haunches on the opposite side of the fire. It continued to look at him as if it hadn't quite made up its mind about something.

"Well, you're a strange one," John said. "I wonder what you want."

"Pardon me, but I overheard your conversation with the troll," the fox said. "About seeking your fortune, I mean. It made sense to me." She had a pleasant voice, definitely female.

For a moment John just stared. The troll had not even startled him so. For one thing, he knew trolls at least by reputation, and the fact that they could and did speak was well known. But he had known several foxes in his time on his farm, and in all that time he had never met one who could talk.

"Ummm… thank you? I don't mean to give offense, but I didn't know foxes could speak."

"They can't, now that you mention it. I'm not really a fox," said the fox.

John considered this. "May I ask what you are?"

"I'm a princess. I've been enchanted. If you break the spell, I'll marry you."

"Oh, please," John said. "If you really heard what I said to the troll, you'd have a better understanding of my circumstances."

"You said you sought your fortune. What could be more fortunate than marrying a wealthy princess?"

"For one thing, if your voice is anything to base a judgment on, you're hardly more than a child. For another, and this is another advantage of starting my quest so late—I'm too old to fall for a fairy tale. There are no kingdoms in this wilderness, and therefore no princesses, enchanted or otherwise. Now tell me the truth or go away."

The fox seemed peeved, but finally sighed and lowered her muzzle. "My name is Alessa," she said, "and you're right, I'm not a princess. But my powers of speech should prove to you that I *am* enchanted, so at least that much is true. A giant has taken over my home and forced me out into the world in the form you see here. I need your help."

"I'm not unsympathetic, but I'm an old man now and I wasn't a hero even when I was younger. What do you think I can do?"

"To overcome the giant I don't need a hero," Alessa said. "I need someone of sense and courage. Your encounter with the troll shows you have both."

"When you're not overly concerned about what happens to you, that's not courage. And I'd hardly call it sense. So, the truth, please."

The fox lowered her head again. "The truth is that you're all I have. There hasn't been a traveler on this road in weeks. Even the troll has been reduced to fishing for his supper most of the

time. If you help me break this enchantment, I'll reward you with gold or whatever you want. I may not be a princess, but I do have means. I can prove that if you doubt me."

"How?"

"Let me show you my home. It's not very far from here."

John considered this. "Fair enough. We'll leave in the morning."

John rolled up in his blankets, and the fox curled up by the fire. When morning came, they rose early and continued down the trail—it would be glorifying the thing to call it a road at this point—and then turned down a forest path that was even narrower. While John wasn't particularly pleased to be so far from the main trail, the way was clear enough and he knew there was little chance of getting lost. They finally came to the edge of a rather large and hilly meadow, and on the very highest hill of that meadow there sat a castle. It was well-built of smooth granite stones; pennants flew from its towers. John turned to the fox again.

"Perhaps I spoke too hastily. Are you sure you're not a princess?"

"One doesn't have to be noble to have a fine house," Alessa said. "My parents were wealthy."

"Why did they build their home in the middle of nowhere?"

The fox tilted her head. "They liked their privacy."

"Again, you're speaking of them in the past. This means you're an orphan? If so, I'm sorry for your loss."

The fox looked as if she was trying to shrug. "Everyone who lives is an orphan eventually," Alessa said. "But thank you for your concern. I was managing well enough until the giant came."

"A giant who performs enchantments? Is that normal?"

"Well…" Alessa looked about as sheepish as one can look who is currently a fox. "The giant didn't enchant me, exactly."

John nodded. He was becoming used to continuing revelations from his new companion. "What did he do, then? Exactly."

"He barged into my house when I was alone. I was afraid. I tried to put a spell on him to protect myself."

"A spell? You didn't tell me you were a witch."

"An *enchantress*, thank you very much," Alessa said, sounding miffed. "My parents were thaumaturgically inclined, if you must know. It's a tradition in my family."

"So you're saying you enchanted yourself? Then can't you simply break it?"

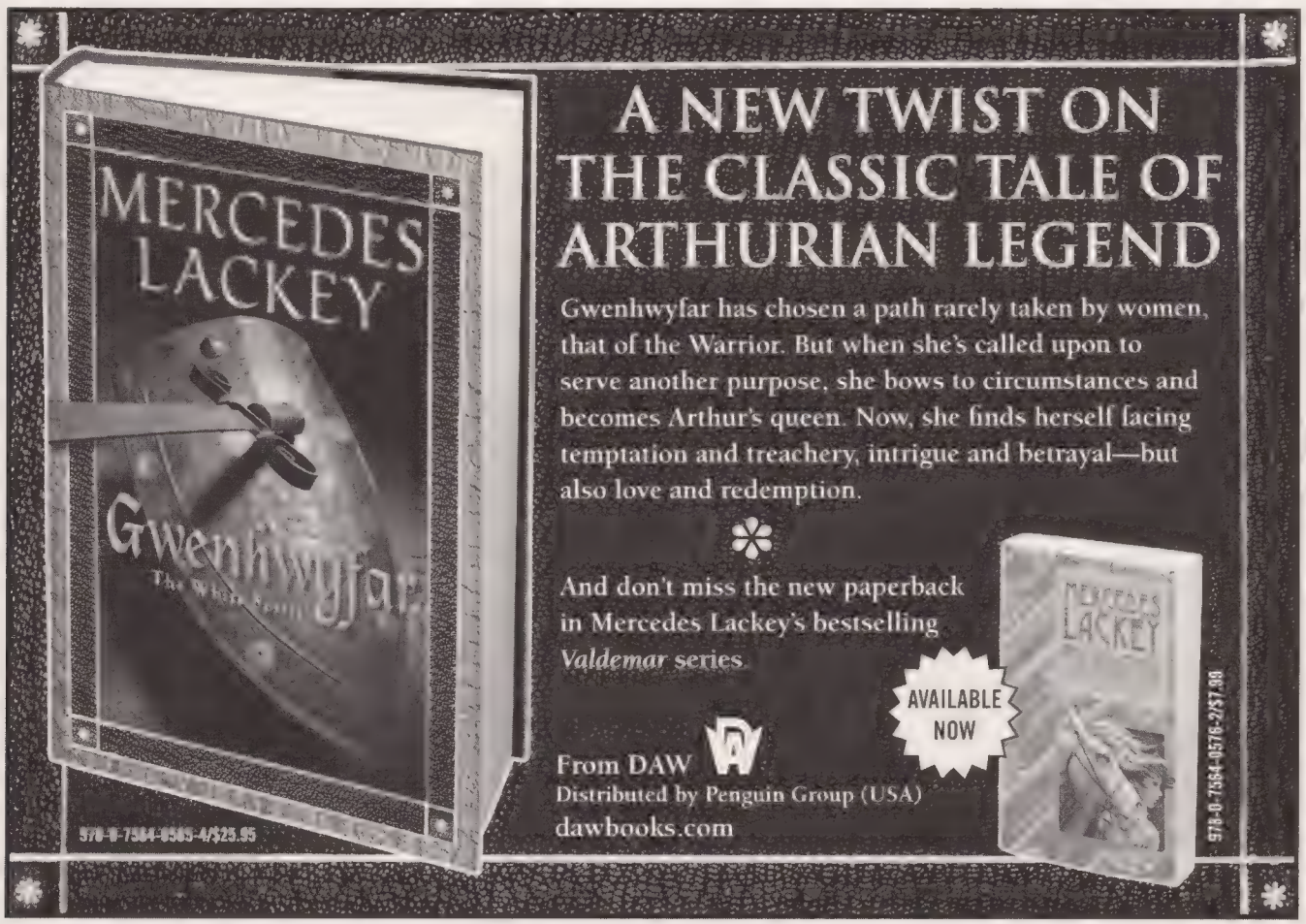
"You try drawing a Rune of Crystal Intent without hands sometime," Alessa snapped. "First I need you to subdue the giant, and I'll tell you a way to do that. Then I can find what I need and show you how to break the spell."

John frowned. "How do I know you won't turn me into a frog when this is all done?"

The fox showed its teeth in something like a smile. "Oh, honestly… I suppose you don't. Yet you see how my last spell turned out."

John wasn't placated, but in fairness he could see her point.

"We'll need to get inside without being seen," Alessa continued. "If we circle through the woods, we can approach by the stables, and they block the view of the woods from the castle on that side.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He would have to be on the parapet itself to see us, and he keeps to the great hall."

"How do you know that?"

"It's the only room tall enough that he doesn't bump his head… aside from the kitchens. I'm sure he's eaten my cupboards bare by now."

Any lingering doubts John might have had about Alessa's familiarity with the castle and grounds were immediately put to rest. She clearly knew what she was about, and John followed where she led as they kept well within the woods until they had circled to the eastern side of the castle. There was no sign of anyone on the parapets, and if there were any windows or arrow-slits on that side of the wall, the stables were blocking sight of them. The stable was a separate building; there wasn't so much as a curtain wall around the grounds, which rather gave John the impression that the place was more a grand home than a true fortress.

The stables were empty except for one unhappy gelding munching some moldy-looking hay. It had a high wooden saddle strapped to its girth. Nearby was a trough with some scummy water. As a farmer, John found the sight deeply offensive. "How long has that poor beast been saddled?"

"Probably from the day the giant came."

"Well, that won't do at all." John ignored the fox's protests and, having approached the horse carefully, proceeded to remove the saddle and blanket and place them over the barrier of an empty stall. The gelding shook itself in gratitude once the weight was gone, and John patted its neck. "I'll bring you out for some proper grass and water as soon as we're done," John said, then turned to Alessa. "You really should take better care of your animals."

"He's not mine," she said. "I had a pony when I was little, but this stable's been empty for years. My parents had other means of transport."

"But what would a giant need with a horse like this?"

Alessa sighed. "Can we discuss this later? Any more commotion and he'll hear us!"

John could see the sense in that. They emerged from a small door on the side of the stable closest to the castle wall. There was a thick iron-braced door there leading into the castle proper, and it was locked.

"The key is around my neck," Alessa whispered, "but I can't reach it."

John ran his fingers over the fox's neck and found a golden chain hidden there under her fur, and an iron key attached to that chain. He carefully unhooked the clasp and took the key. The lock mechanism was quiet enough, but the door itself groaned on its hinges as he opened it. They waited for a moment, but heard nothing from within except for a deep, low rumble.

"That sounds like snoring," John said.

The fox grinned by showing her teeth. "We're in luck. He's asleep. Follow me."

The door led immediately into the kitchen, which, as Alessa had predicted, was a shambles: the iron spit in the great hearth was lying on the flagstones in front of the ashes, the door to the pantry had been ripped from its hinges and lay propped against a wall. A quick glance inside showed that provisions had been mostly eaten and the scraps discarded to fall where they would.

The fox's muzzle wrinkled in distaste. "I'll be weeks sorting this out."

John followed her as they moved carefully into the great hall. The giant—barely—sat in the great chair at the head of an immense banquet table, the remains of his last meal scattered in front of him. He was a thick, stupid-looking creature about twelve feet tall with arms and legs that made even the troll's look scrawny by comparison. His chest rose and fell slowly as he snored, making the rumbling noise John and Alessa had first heard upon entering.

He was a thick, stupid-looking creature about twelve feet tall with arms and legs that made even the troll's look scrawny by comparison.

There was a large staircase to one side of the hall. "This way," Alessa hissed, and they moved as quickly as they dared toward it.

The giant's bulbous nose wrinkled, and he snuffled like someone with a cold. "Rrrrrr… fox. Smell fox." He muttered as his eyelids opened.

Alessa gasped. "Smell? How dare he—"

"Umm, I don't think this is quite the time to take offense," John said as the giant came fully awake.

"Fox!" the giant shouted when it spied Alessa and John. It struggled to rise, but only succeeded in collapsing the overloaded chair, which fell to the floor and took the giant with it. They heard a mighty *whoosh*! as the giant's wind was knocked out.

"This way, quickly, before he gets his breath back!" Alessa shouted, and she darted up the staircase. It was all John could do to keep up. He got a quick view of strange tapestries and rich furnishings, but he didn't have time to take it all in. By the time he followed Alessa through a large doorway toward the end of the long hall, he was out of breath himself.

I'm not a young man anymore.

Which was rather obvious, and part of the reason he'd gone questing in the first place, but the run had rather reminded him

of it. By the time he got his second wind, the floor had started to shake.

"He's coming up the stairs!" Alessa said.

There was a scraping sound, and then a loud thud.

"He tripped and fell on the stairs," John said. "Are all giants that clumsy?"

"I'm not familiar with giants," Alessa said. "That's the first one I've ever met. Just don't think he's too clumsy to snap us both in half."

While John understood that getting snapped in half by a giant was also a risk of seeking his fortune, that didn't mean he was enamored of the idea. "We're here. Now what?"

"There's a mirror somewhere on the table. Fetch it, please."

With all the excitement, John hadn't even noticed where they were. Now he saw without a great deal of surprise that they were in a young woman's bedroom. There were the usual things one might expect of a well-born young lady's room: a large canopied bed, several rich tapestries, a sewing frame. There were also strange mechanisms and thick, leather-covered books marked with arcane symbols and sheets of parchment likewise covered. John found the mirror among them as Alessa glanced at one of the sheets. "Oh, blast. The tail on the trigram. That's what I did wrong."

"I gather you were in a hurry."

"The beast was right outside my door! I didn't have a lot of time," Alessa said, sounding a little sullen. "Did you find the mirror?"

John held up a small hand mirror chased in silver. "Here it is. So you were trying to turn the giant into a fox?"

"No, I was trying to turn him into a rabbit, but magic tends to decide on its own what forms it will assume, unless you're very firm with it. I'm not the enchantress my mother was… not yet, anyway. I was holding the mirror to keep my own form and nature clear as I cast the spell, but the enchantment bounced off the mirror and into me. You see what happened."

The giant announced his imminent arrival with a roar and a clatter as he knocked a suit of polished armor off its stand.

"Fox!" the giant bellowed.

"He seems to be angry with you."

"No doubt. Hold the mirror up in front of me, please."

John did as she directed, placing the mirror in front of Alessa's muzzle. She muttered something John couldn't quite hear, and then opened her jaws and let out a long, slow breath that fogged the mirror.

"I've laid an enchantment on the glass. Before the fog fades completely, you have to show the giant his own reflection, which means you'll have to get close to him."

"He'll crush me!"

"If you attacked him as a hero would, he most certainly would crush you, but I know you've got more sense than that. You can do this."

John was less certain about that, but since there was no way out except past the giant, he didn't see that he had a lot of choice. John took the mirror and stepped into the hallway.

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The giant was down on his hands and knees, sniffing along the corridor like some great hound. He spotted John standing in front of the door to Alessa's bedroom, and he growled.

"I'm not the fox," John said.

The giant frowned, and shuffled closer. "Fox!"

John forgot to breathe for a moment, then realized that the giant hadn't mistaken him for the fox. He was *demanding* the fox.

"What do you want with a fox?"

The giant frowned again. John got the impression that the thick-brained creature was actually trying to form a coherent thought. He finally gave up and just repeated hid demand. "Fox!"

John glanced at the mirror. The fog was almost gone.

"She's in there," he said, pointing at the door to Alessa's bedroom. John heard a gasp from inside, but he ignored it.

The joy on the hulking creature's face was almost painful to see. "Fox!" He shuffled forward too quickly, and then lifted one arm when he should have lifted the other, and wound up pitching face-first into the floorboards, which groaned in protest. He almost looked embarrassed as he got back to his hands and knees.

"You know, you really don't have the knack for this, do you?"

The giant scowled. "Not fox."

John saw the warning on the creature's face, but there was no time to hesitate. "You can't go in there like that. Just look at yourself."

He held the mirror in front of the giant's face. The giant stopped, looking puzzled, and then, for the first time since he had appeared in the corridor, actually seemed to form a thought. He started to cry. Then the fog on the mirror vanished and took the giant with it. One moment he was there, the next he wasn't. John looked cautiously into the mirror and found it again. He saw the giant's reflection as if the giant were right in front of him, but when he put out his hand where the giant appeared to be, there was nothing.

The reflection was sobbing miserably.

John sighed and stuck the mirror in his belt just as Alessa cautiously poked her muzzle around the doorway. "You did it!"

"Apparently," John said.

"Now all we have to do is put the mirror somewhere no one will ever find it, and I'll be rid of him. I know just the place. Give me the mirror."

"What about breaking the spell?"

"This is more important," Alessa said.

"I disagree. I'll hang onto the mirror for now, if you don't mind. You haven't told me everything, young lady."

Alessa glared at him. "You're not the only one going on faith here, you know," she said. "You worry about me turning you into a frog or whatnot, but with the giant out of the way, there's nothing to stop you from taking over my home in his place and leaving me as I am!"

"You're right," John said. "And if I was that sort of man, you'd be in deep trouble right now. But I'm not. But before I go much further, I need to understand what sort of person *you* are. I already know you're a magician, as your parents were. What happened to them?"

"My mother and father were great magicians," Alessa said, "but magic is dangerous, even for adepts. They attempted a Great Work, and they failed. I don't know how it happened, but it cost them their lives."

"Then they were reckless and irresponsible, and should never have taken such risks knowing they had a daughter to care for."

"They were what they were. They never hurt anyone, even those who deserved it, and I'll not have you speak ill of them. How dare you?" John was certain he heard a growl low in Alessa's throat. He smiled.

"You loved them."

John rather thought that Alessa would have frowned, if a fox could frown. "Of course."

John nodded. "That's all I wanted to know."

"About my parents?"

"About you. We'll discuss your parents—and the giant—later. For right now, tell me what to do to help you."

Which turned out to be surprisingly simple, using human hands. John corrected the diagram as Alessa instructed and added the symbol that, according to Alessa, reversed the intent of the enchantment. When the last stroke of ink was made the fox shimmered like a stone road on a hot day; then, where the fox had been, there stood a beautiful young girl with freckles and long red hair.

John sighed. "How old are you? Fourteen?"

"Fifteen this October," Alessa said primly. "But I meant what I said. I will marry you, if that's your price."

John smiled. "No you won't, because you're still a child, and I'm not that sort of old goat. Now, then." John pulled out the mirror and showed Alessa the reflection in it. "How do we free him?"

There was no giant trapped in the mirror now. There was only the image of a well-dressed but rather confused-looking youth behind the glass. John showed the image to Alessa again but she didn't back down. She scowled instead. "So you know. Fine. But

The joy on the hulking creature's face was almost painful to see. "Fox!" He shuffled forward too quickly, and then lifted one arm when he should have lifted the other, and wound up pitching face-first into the floorboards, which groaned in protest.

he *is* a beast. He can stay in that mirror for all I care!"

"He's a boy barely older than you, and no, he can't," John said in a voice that did not invite argument. "You both got caught in the same botched enchantment, I see. What's his name?"

Alessa shrugged with badly feigned indifference. "Devon. He's the Earl's third son. We met at some court function or other. When he heard about my parents, he came here while I was alone. I don't know what he intended, truly, but he frightened me."

"I believe you. Now how do I get him out?"

"If you must do it, the only way is to break the mirror. Pity. I rather liked that mirror."

John dropped the mirror to the floor, and it shattered. Then each piece of the glass rose into the air and broke in half again, then broke again until there was nothing but a haze of silvery dust that coalesced into the shape of a rather plain but well-formed young man, who stood there for a moment blinking, until he caught sight of Alessa.

"Alessa, what is the meaning…"

He didn't finish, because he took two steps toward the cowering girl, and on the third his feet got tangled in John's boot as the older man tripped him. Devon came crashing down face-first to the floor, where John proceeded to place that same boot firmly on the young man's neck.

"Old man, do you know who I am?!" he started to struggle, but John pressed down harder, and the boy thought better of it.

"Young man, rather I should ask *you* who you think you are, barging into this young lady's home like that, and so soon after her loss? What were you thinking?"

He glared. "I only meant to console her."

Alessa stamped her foot. "You pushed in the door as if you were lord here already! You're lucky I didn't reach for an axe rather than my spellbook!"

He looked hurt. "I thought you liked me."

Alessa blushed crimson, but before she could say anything, John interrupted.

"Regardless," he said, "that's no way to behave with a young lady, bereft or otherwise. First, apologize to her. Now." The boot came down a little harder.

"I'm sorry, Alessa," Devon said, sounding as if he meant it. "I really didn't mean to frighten you. I only meant… well, I'm sorry."

"Second," John said, "you've got a horse in the stable that badly needs looking after before the poor beast dies of neglect. While I'm not so certain of your wit even now, your brain as a giant clearly wasn't working well enough to do more than eat and sleep. Now see to it. Later we'll discuss a proper visit, if Alessa forgives you. Understand, that part is not up to me."

"I'll think about it," Alessa said, sounding fierce, but John was sure that she was barely suppressing a smile.

Devon scurried off, looking not so proud and much more chastened. "That was well done," Alessa said grudgingly. "If I had handled the situation half as well, I wouldn't have wound up a fox. So. There's still the matter of your reward. If you don't want my hand in marriage, then what do you wish of me? I will grant you anything within my power."

John thought about it. "I didn't mean what I said about your parents. Clearly they did a good job of your upbringing. It's just that they died with the task unfinished. As this business with Devon should have made clear, right now you don't need a husband—you need a father."

"I'm almost fifteen!"

"And you just made my point. Besides, I've never been a father, and I always thought I'd be rather good at it, given the chance. I'd like to know if I was right about that before I die, and that's the reward I want. You gave your word, Alessa. No daughter of mine or your sainted parents would break it."

"Well," she said finally. "I did give my word. I'm willing to try it."

Later the Earl's third son came to visit the castle again, politely, respectfully—warily—and this time no one got turned into anything. Which, wherever matters might eventually lead, John felt was a pretty good start. For everyone. ❧

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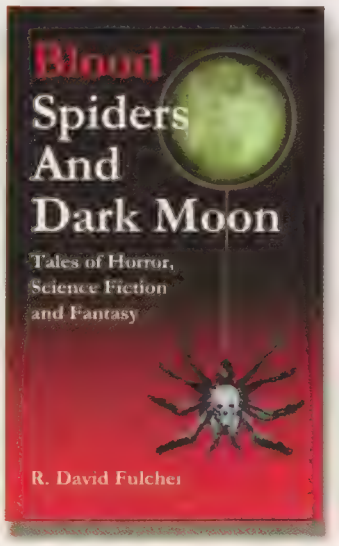

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Felicity's Engine

by Sharon Mock

Illustrated by Dave Leri

In the battle between self-interest and loyalty, self-interest will always win. After a fashion, anyway...

In the ruins of the Fairy city there once lived a cat and a dog. They had been enemies before, when their mistress still walked the halls of the great house; but now that they were alone and dependent on what food and water they could find among the jealous stone and metal, they had come to something of a compromise. Cat cared only for a full belly, warm sunlight, leisure, and rest; while Dog scarcely dared to leave his mistress's side, even to feed, in case she should wake up from her long, cold sleep. But they both needed to eat, so they traded off duties, one hunting while the other guarded. Cat had learned long ago not to call the whole thing silly within Dog's keen earshot.

They had names, of course, though they no longer used them. Cat had never paid much attention to his, even before the great house fell to ruin. Dog, on the other hand, remembered his name perfectly well. The sound of it echoed through his dreams as his nose and paws twitched. But without his mistress, it was meaningless, and he would not abide any other to speak it.

One night, while Cat was out hunting, Dog awoke to find a monster lurching toward his mistress's bones. It was a truck or wagon of sorts, low and brutal, like one of the machines that had ripped apart the city years ago. (It was, in fact, one of our Army's sapper engines, not that Dog had any way of knowing this.) It rolled toward him on rubber treads, filling the room with a Cat-like rumble. One eye glowed like foxfire; the other dangled from its socket. Two green crayfish claws reached out toward his mistress. Above what passed for a head, a sharp-nosed scoop swayed ominously. Dog barked and growled and bristled as big as he could, but it made no difference. The monster kept rolling, a blind, deaf, hungry beast.

"Oh, give it up, you lazy hound." Cat leapt gracefully out of the scoop, and the engine stopped. "Look at what I've found in the dirt!"

"Are you insane?" Dog snapped. "That's one of the murderers' engines!" (For that is how the Fairy-kind think of us.) "Why have you brought it here?"

"Don't be silly," said Cat. "It doesn't belong to *them* anymore. It's part of the city now." And indeed, the engine no longer smelled of soot and oil, but of damp soil and sunlight and the tang of waking stone. As Dog watched, the engine lowered its scoop and laid its claws out on the ground, as though its dumb body bowed before them.

"I was thinking it could help us," Cat said, grooming himself with great dignity. "It could lift up slabs and pillars so we can get at what's underneath without having to dig in the dirt. It wants to help us, can't you see?"

Dog sniffed dubiously at the engine's cracked tread. The city's living buildings were no friend to them, as likely to throw loose tiles at their backs as open doors to forgotten caches of meat. He saw no reason why this machine should be any different. And though it had clearly been out of the hands of the murderers for a very long time, it was still a tool of those whose fire and steel left them alone in the ruined world.

"He could guard our mistress while we're gone hunting," Cat purred.

Dog's hackles raised again. "*I* will guard," he said. "It can hunt."

Cat preened and twirled at the news, much like their mistress had, back in the happy days. Then he stalked back into the engine's lowered scoop, and fell asleep while the engine raised him high above its head.

Dog slept with one eye open and watching the murderers' engine that night, and for many nights thereafter. But he had to admit that the food it helped to catch filled his belly very well indeed.

One day, Cat returned from his hunt with the engine, in an unusually cheerful mood. "I've been thinking," Cat said.

Dog said nothing. He knew it was dangerous when Cat decided to think.

"Perhaps the Queen will be interested in our newfound friend," Cat continued.

"The Queen! The Queen abandoned the city to the murderers. She let our mistress die! Why should we give anything to her?"

"I've heard that if you bring her a good enough present, she'll give you anything you want in return. And what would be a better present than one of the murderers' engines, all healed up and eager to swear to her service?"

"I bet there's iron in it. It won't make it through the gates."

"The Armory says there's not. He says the engine was made to bore under the walls and tear down the Court itself. But it belongs to the city now, it doesn't even remember what it was

before."

"You should know better than to listen to buildings. They only mean mischief to living things like us." But in the back of Dog's head, a thought was slowly taking shape. For everybody knew the Fairy Queen could work miracles.

"I'm the one who found the engine," Cat said. "I was going to let you come along, but if you don't want to, you can stay here and starve."

"I won't leave her," Dog said, inching closer to his mistress.

"That old heap of bones?" Cat's eyes narrowed cleverly. "We could take her with us, you know."

The engine chuffed and bobbed its scoop in agreement. The city might have granted it life and consciousness, but it was still quite stupid, really.

"And like I said," Cat continued in a persuasive rumble, "give her something valuable enough, and the Queen will give you anything your heart desires."

"Anything," Dog said doubtfully, but in truth he was convinced, and Cat knew it.

So they found an old pushcart and had the engine attach it to its backside, loaded up their mistress's bones, and set off for the Fairy Court.

Much to Dog's annoyance, Cat was right about everything. The machine passed through the gate without so much as a shudder, and the soldiers declared at once that it must appear before the Court. Cat and Dog were bathed and brushed and fed the finest morsels of food; the engine's brass and silver were polished to an eye-watering shine. The cart was cleaned and painted bright colors, and a bright tapestry cast over its contents, for Dog would not allow it to be removed. Only then, with everything as clean and bright and beautiful as possible, could they approach the Fairy Queen.

Neither Cat nor Dog had ever seen so many people in one place. Cat's fur seemed to shine even brighter under all the attention. The Fairy Queen was endlessly beautiful to his eyes, with long slender hands made to pet fur, and she smelled of catnip and fish. It was all he could do not to leap onto her lap, and purr outrageously.

But Dog was not so trusting. He knew the Fairies cared nothing for beasts like himself. And though the Queen shone like a warm fire, and smelled soft and light as flowers, he knew she was *not* his mistress, no matter how much she smelled like it, no matter how she bade his heart tell him otherwise.

As they approached the throne, the Queen clapped her hands together with, Dog thought, exaggerated glee. "Look at this miracle!" she cried, her voice bright music in the hall. "One of our enemy's engines of war, in full working order! And brought here by two of the smallest, humblest members of my kingdom. Were it otherwise, I might suspect treason. But I am sure these poor creatures mean no harm, and anyway I perceive this device is loyal to me now. Am I right?"

The engine lowered its scoop and claws in the semblance of a courtly bow. Dog seemed to be the only one to notice the contempt and menace behind the Queen's words. Certainly, based on his preening, Cat did not.

"My colleague and I found it in the city," Cat said. "The city woke it up and taught it everything it knows. It wants to serve you, my Queen."

The Queen bent down and placed her hand on Cat's head. "You have done well, little Cat," she said. "You have given me a gift beyond measure, knowledge of our enemy's weapons, and an engine to use against them. You must let me grant you something in return."

"Oh, Queen," Cat murmured, "I am but a lowly beast, with simple needs. If I could only have a warm fire, and a soft pillow, and food in my belly, and a kind hand to stroke my fur, surely I would be content for the rest of my days."

"What you ask is little enough, and easily given." The Queen ordered servants to fetch a silk pillow to set at the foot of her throne, and crystal bowls of milk and fowl. There Cat took his place, gazing down proudly and purring so that the entire hall rumbled with his pleasure.

The Queen turned then to Dog. "And what of you, gentle hound? What would you ask of me? A green field, perhaps, with birds and deer to chase, and as much meat and bone as you desire?"

Dog did not trust this bright woman with the familiar voice and scent. But he had come all this way, so he asked his boon. "Your majesty, since the fall of the great city I have stayed by the side of my mistress. Since then she has not sung, nor spoken, nor moved. She is there in the cart, for I will not leave her, even to pay my respects to you. I can ask for nothing for myself so long as her bones sleep."

"Such loyalty!" the Queen cried with bone-chilling delight. She approached the cart and made a great show of peering under the cover. "Ah, poor hound. I shall make certain your mistress has a proper burial, as a testament to your fidelity. But I cannot bring her back. Even I have no power over death."

Dog lifted his chin from his paws. "Then I shall take my leave, your majesty, for there is nothing else that I would ask of you."

"No, wait!" She put her hand on his head and he could not move, no matter how much his heart wished to. "True loyalty is so rare in this world. I cannot let it go unrecognized." Her gaze traveled from Dog to the engine and back again. "Tell me, what is your name?"

Her hand was soft and warm. The scent of his mistress filled his nose. Only his mistress had the right to his name. He knew the Queen was not her, but the scent flowed through him, and he could not keep himself from answering.

"Felicity," he said.

And with that name the Queen of the Fairies took his soul and bound it to the humans' engine, assuring its faithful service forever. So all such loyalty is rewarded in the Fairy lands.

The Queen did bury the mistress's bones, for she is a woman of her word, in her way. Each day, after Felicity finished its duties for the Court, it stood guard over the gravesite, for it needed neither food nor rest. Many years later Cat died, after a long life with warm fires and soft cushions and a belly ever full of milk and meat. The Queen, in her generosity, let him be buried at his mistress's feet.

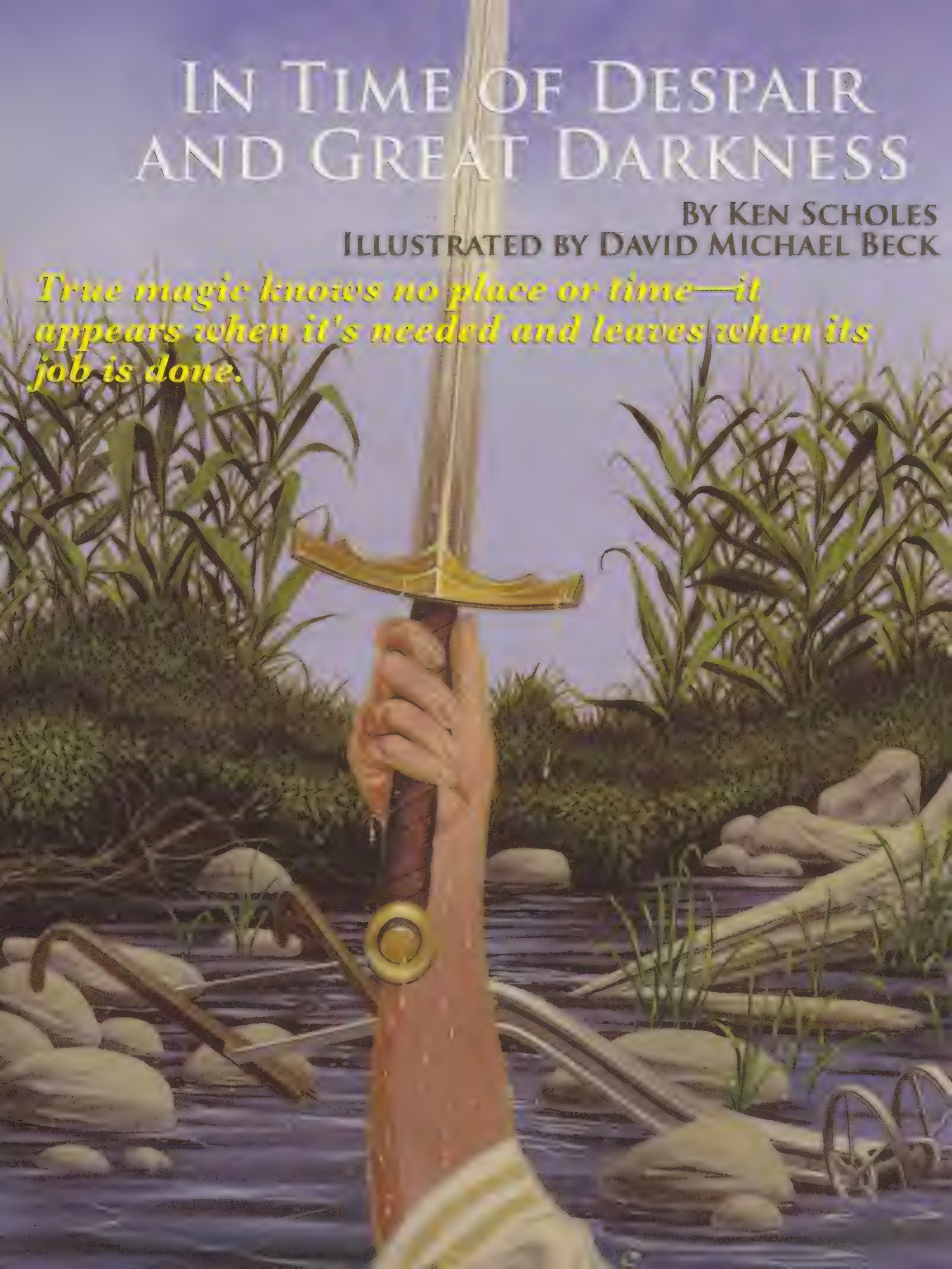
And Felicity stood guard over his grave, too.

In Time of Despair and Great Darkness

By Ken Scholes

Illustrated by David Michael Beck

True magic knows no place or time—it appears when it's needed and leaves when its job is done.



My uncle, Mordecai Bach, found an old sword in the watery mud of a trench near Ypres at the end of the war. Of course, I never heard him tell of it himself. He was a taciturn, quiet man, rarely speaking outside the walls of the little First Baptist church he deaconed at about a hundred miles outside Boise City, Oklahoma.

Way my father told it, Uncle Mordecai smuggled it home and hung it on the wall of his barn with the rest of his tools until the day he converted.

Reverend Archer was a revivalist in those days, and he'd pitched a mighty tent over a sawdust floor, giving testament unto the power of the Lord to save and forgive the sins of men. One particular night, sweat flying from his hair and jowls, he'd pointed a crooked finger at my uncle and cut loose with a stream of Bible like as to make your hair stand up. Something from the second chapter of Isaiah stuck true, and my father's brother went down on his knees to take the Christ into his heart and vowed to give over his life unto the cross.

Proud of shoeing his own mules and doing his own ironmongery, he went home straightaway and banged that sword into what the Good Book called a plowshare, following the word of the Lord as best he knew how.

My father always told the next bit with a chuckle, despite my uncle's sullen glare.

First time out to field, he ran the plowshare into a buried mountain of granite and it stuck fast, breaking the leg of his best pulling mule and becoming somewhat of a local curiosity quickly forgotten.

Every day for well on a year, he hitched mule and snapped reins with nary a budge before he gave up.

My father, less patient I reckon, only tried twice that I know of.

Of course, by the time I was old enough to cotton to those yarns, I was more interested in Amy Sue Peller and how soft her skin felt under my clumsy hands. And not long after that, the world went to hell again despite the jam-packed little church my uncle helped to build amid the corn.

Truth is, I didn't care much about that old plow until the strangers showed up asking after it.

I was walking home from Piker's Creek when the fancy car pulled up alongside. I was whistling and walking slow, thinking about how warm a breast can be beneath the fingers, and how a girl's hair could smell like apples and summer, when the man called out to me.

I looked to him. He was older than my uncle by a long shot, his beard white and trimmed close, and his spectacles shining bright in the afternoon sun. It was the deep blue turban that assured me he had to be from back East.

"Pardon me, lad," he called out. "I'm looking for a farm."

I blinked, looked around me at the barren fields, and nodded. "There are a lot of farms around here, Mister," I told him. I didn't bother to tell him that in these dark times, most were closing down and packing up.

He smiled at me, and I saw that one of his teeth was bright polished gold. "Actually," he said, "I'm looking for a particular farm." Now I noticed he had three friends with him, all old, bearded men in hats to match his own. He leaned his head further out the window. "I'm looking for the Mordecai Bach farm, but I appear to have missed a turn."

I pushed my hat up on my head. "No, Sir, you ain't." I pointed my fishing rod further on down the road. "It's ahead yonder. Look for the yellow barn."

He smiled again and tossed me a silver coin that I caught from the air. "Thank you, lad. You've done us a great service."

And before I could say another word, the dust from his Ford was in my eyes and mouth, and he and his friends were sputtering off down the road towards home.

When I could see again, I looked at the coin, but couldn't for the life of me make heads or tails of it. I slipped it into my right pocket, the one without a hole in it, and stretched into an easy jog.

When I approached the house, my father and the men were on the porch talking. My uncle was nowhere to be seen, but my mother was bustling about with a pitcher of lemonade and a plateful of her blue-ribbon gingersnaps.

When my father saw me coming, he waved me over. "Where you been, boy?"

"Fishing," I lied, wondering what excuse Amy Sue would offer up to her own father, another of Reverend Archer's hard-handed deacons. The look on my father's face told me he knew Piker's Creek was nothing but a trickle with the drought on.

"This here's my boy, Arthur Lee."

"Yes," the blue-turbaned man said, nodding. "He was kind enough to direct us to you." He nibbled politely at a cookie; I could tell his heart wasn't in it. "A very polite young man. And well-named." His companions nodded their agreement.

My father grunted; it was the closest thing to pride a hard man like Enoch Bach could offer. He looked to me. "These here Englishmen want to see Mordecai's Folly. Why don't you show them?"

"But don't be long," my mother added. "Supper's nearly on."

I don't know if it was curiosity or the potential for another fancy coin, but I didn't mind the notion at all. I'd never met Englishmen before, but should've guessed it by their dapper dress. I wondered if that meant the coin in my pocket—and the others I was sure to earn shortly—were from that far-off place. "I'd be happy to show you," I said.

They put down their half-eaten cookies and quarter-drank glasses as if of one mind and stood. "We'd be grateful for your help, young Arthur."

So we crowded into their car and rumbled off into the field, out towards Piker's Creek.

The sun was low and the sky was red running to brown when we approached the abandoned plow. It stood solitary in a wide open space. The driver set the handbrake and we climbed out.

The leader looked excited. "How long has it been in the stone?" he asked.

I scratched my head. "I was little. Maybe twelve years?"

But he was already crouching beside it, bending over to look beneath the wood frame. He brushed dangling leather aside and gasped.

The others gasped, too.

"Behold," the man with the golden tooth said in a quiet voice.

But the word he said next wasn't one I'd heard before.

I wanted to ask my father about the blue stone. I wanted to tell him about the shoulder holsters and the strange language they spoke. More than anything else, I wanted to tell him that I couldn't bear the notion of leaving Amy Sue in Oklahoma.

They gathered around the plow, testing the wheels with their shiny shoes, and gently lifting at the handlebars. Their leader was mumbling to them, and I leaned forward to hear him. I only caught every other sentence.

"We'll have to buy the farm," he said at one point. And at another: "We can bring the children over one at a time until the right one is found."

Then they started speaking quickly among themselves in a language I didn't recognize at all.

Of course, none of this really registered with me. Something else had caught my eye when the wind had whipped up the jacket on one of the men who bent to examine the blade.

It sure looked like a shoulder holster.

Later, we all gathered around the dining room table.

When the old man smiled, his tooth glowed yellow in the lamplight. "How is the farm doing?" he asked.

My father shrugged and looked to my mother. "Not well."

My uncle Mordecai was still hidden away in his room. I could hear the canned sound of old-time gospel music trickling out from under his door.

"Yes." The old man reached into his pocket. "I might have a bit of welcome news for you, Mr. Bach."

He drew out a blue gem nearly the color of his hat. He held it up to the lamplight and, for just a moment, I thought I saw something bright sparking at the heart of it.

The old man waited until all eyes were on the stone. Then, he started speaking slowly.

"When I put this stone away you will recall that we reached agreement on a more-than-fair price for your land, outbuildings and—" here he paused and cleared his throat, "—any and *all* farm equipment remaining on the premises." I glanced around the room quickly, took in my father's nod, and the sudden hope on my mother's face. The man saw me looking and frowned. "Tomorrow, you will receive a telegram from the Merlin Trust with the full and final terms of our offer. The day after that, my colleagues and I will return with papers to sign." He leaned in. "You will take the offer, of course, and leave for greener fields once you've packed." Then his voice dropped and sounded near to menacing. "And selling us this farm is the most important and meaningful thing you will ever do. Nothing can get in the way of it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my father's smile break open as he nodded more vigorously. I'd not seen a smile like that on him in more years than I could count. In the back of the house, I heard four voices converging in harmony against a backdrop of guitar and fiddle, and I wondered how my Uncle Mordecai would feel about this sudden development, considering half the farm was his, including the sword these men seemed so keen to possess.

Still, they had to know he was back there, and not one of them moved to fetch him.

The man put the stone away, and my parents blinked.

My father spoke first. "That's an extremely generous offer, given the drought that's on," he said. "What does this here Merlin Trust want with a failing corn farm?" His eyes turned hungry. "Is it oil?"

"Ah," the leader said. "No. Not oil." He looked to his friends for a silent consensus. "We believe your land may have, buried in its soil, certain historical artifacts of particular interest to the Board of Trustees.

Mother spoke up, though her voice sounded far away. "Arrowheads and such?" She looked to me. "You found that arrowhead down near Piker's Creek that time, Artie."

I nodded.

The men stood up now, smoothing their jackets and slacks with their hands. Any excitement I'd seen in them out at the plow was now quietly put away, hidden behind the curtain of official business.

We walked them to the porch, and then we all shook hands.

After they climbed into their car and rolled out of the yard, they honked three times, and their leader waved to us from the window.

I waved back but suddenly, the reality of it all was settling in. "Where will we go?" I asked.

"California," my father said without hesitation.

And all I saw when he said it was Amy Sue Peller's face, framed in her long blonde hair.

I wondered if she would write to me when I was gone.

I tossed and turned that night, and didn't find sleep until the wee hours. The look on the old men's faces as they examined the plow and its blade, buried in the rock, kept coming back to me. And the empty-eyed stare of my parents as they watched the blue stone. And how easily they seemed to remember a negotiation that hadn't happened. And last, Amy Sue and her bright blue eyes rimmed with tears at the news that I was moving away.

My mind spun with questions I wasn't sure how or who to ask.

When the rooster crowed, I was up and getting dressed. My father was on the porch, drinking coffee that steamed into the gray morning air. He looked at me when I came out. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us," he said.

I looked at him and noticed he seemed different. The lines in his face had vanished, and he smiled easily now. I wanted to sniff his coffee for whiskey, but knew better than that. "Are you

okay, Pa?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Never better."

"Have you talked to Uncle Mordecai yet?"

He shook his head. "I'll talk to him later. I want the telegram in my hands first."

I wanted to ask my father about the blue stone. I wanted to tell him about the shoulder holsters and the strange language they spoke. More than anything else, I wanted to tell him that I couldn't bear the notion of leaving Amy Sue in Oklahoma.

But in the end, I couldn't find any of those words. I banked them like a campfire.

Instead, I just sat with him and watched the sun come up over our barren land.

Later that morning, we drove into town for crates and groceries. We rode in silence, my brain wrapped around yesterday and everything that followed. When we rolled past the new library, an idea struck me. "Can we stop here?"

My father slowed down, but didn't stop. "We're moving in less than a week," he said. "I don't think—"

I learned a long time ago not to interrupt my parents, but now I did it anyway. "Just while you're shopping, Pa. I've never been inside. I'd like to see it before we leave."

He scowled for a moment, shrugged, and pulled the truck to the side of the street. "One hour," he said.

I nodded and scrambled out onto the sidewalk.

The library was quiet and Mrs. Derkins sat alone at her massive, ship-sized desk surrounded in paper and rubber stamps. She looked up when I walked in.

"Arthur Lee Bach," she said with a frown. "Why, I *never*." She'd been my Sunday School teacher out at the Baptist church for years, and knew that Amy Sue Peller, sitting there next to me in class, was the only studying I was interested in. Twice she'd taken away the notes we passed during the boring bits of Old Testament begats.

"Morning, Ma'am," I said, removing my hat. I'd heard tell of much bigger libraries in the big cities and universities, but this large room was filled with more books than I'd ever seen in one place. "Is this a good place to find stuff out?" I figured it was.

She surprised me with a smile. "It's a great place to find stuff out," she said. "Well, *some* stuff. The Good Lord didn't intend us to know *everything*."

I got straight to the point. "I need to know about the Merlin Trust."

Her brows furrowed. "Merlin… like the magician?"

I'd seen a magician once, though afterwards my folks had been fairly upset, considering such to be contrary unto the Lord. But I'd watched him make flowers appear and disappear for the ladies, watched him cut his assistant in half, watched him make Gus Holler bark like a dog when he heard Dixie whistled. And of course, at the end of his show, he'd pulled a rabbit from a black hat. "Merlin the magician?"

She shook her head slowly and clucked. Then, she stood and took me back into the shadowy, narrow aisles, amid the smell of books and new paint.

She walked the rows methodically, pulling down a book here and there. Then she took me to small table in the corner and placed the goodly pile on its plain wood surface.

Some of the words were hard, but most weren't beyond figuring out. I sat there and turned the pages, looking for one thing and finding another.

I read about another boy named Arthur and a sword stuck in a stone. I read about a Lady in a lake and a wizard named Merlin and a host of others that made the apostles' names look easy to pronounce. I'd never been much of a reader, but those stories birthed something in me that was almost as urgent and mighty as the hope I felt every time I heard Amy Sue's voice or touched her soft skin or kissed her wet mouth.

And along with whatever that strange, brain-opening sensation was, I also started to wonder if maybe, just maybe, these stories might have as much truth in them as Joshua and Jericho and Jesus and Jonah.

And of course, at the end of his show, he'd pulled a rabbit from a black hat

I heard my father's horn outside the library, and looked up at the clock on the wall. An hour had slipped past.

When I went out to the truck, two men in suits were standing by it, and Pa was talking to them through the open window. Sheriff Radke stood there with them, looking disinterested in the conversation. The men looked like big city folk, uncomfortable with the notion of dusty streets and hot wind.

"We know," one of them was saying, "that some folks have been asking after you and your brother's farm. We'd like you to get in touch if they contact you."

I couldn't see my father's face, but I heard his voice. "Why would anyone ask after our farm?"

I stopped a few steps from the truck.

One of the men pushed back his hat and scratched his head. There, clear as day, beneath his armpit hung a holstered revolver. "We're not rightly sure, but we'd like to ask them some questions and find out."

"Have these folks broken the law?"

"Not that we know of, Mr. Bach."

My father nodded, then glanced over and saw me standing on the sidewalk. "There's my boy now," he said. He looked back to the men. "I'll surely call if anyone turns up," he said, "but I can't imagine why they'd care about an old, dead farm."

"Much obliged," the other man said. Then they looked to the sheriff. "Thank you for introducing us."

The sheriff looked pleased with himself. "Happy to." He smiled at my father. "See you in church, Enoch."

My father smiled back. "See you there." Then, he looked back to me. "Come on then, Artie. We've work to do while the day's still young."

I opened the door and climbed in, moving a stack of

legal-looking papers from the passenger seat into the glove compartment. As we rumbled off homeward, I stared at my dad. I wanted to ask him why he'd just lied to those men in front of Deacon Radke, but I didn't know how. Instead, I asked him who they were.

"Federal men out of Oklahoma City," he told me. "But don't concern yourself with them."

I didn't know how to tell him that they concerned me far less than his sudden, easy smile and the sudden, easy lies that hid behind it.

That night, Amy Sue Peller met me down at Piker's Creek. We sat on a rock there and watched the trickling water go silver as the moon rose over it.

She shifted beneath my arm and pressed herself closer to me. "I can't believe you're moving," she finally said. She hadn't cried yet, but I thought I heard her voice catch.

I squeezed her shoulders. "I surely don't want to."

"When do you leave?" I felt her hand on my thigh, her fingers picking at the denim nervously.

"Saturday," I told her. "I spent all day packing."

She sighed. "My folks have been talking about selling, too. Pa says it's going to get worse before it gets better. My uncle has an orchard up in Washington and could use the help." She pulled away and turned to face me. "What's happening to the world, Arthur Lee? It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Her eyes held me until I saw her lower lip quivering. Leaning in, I kissed her slow and long. When we finished, I held her for a minute or two, until our breathing came back to normal. After that, we worked ourselves up a few more times before she disentangled herself and stood up, brushing the dust from her dress. Even in the dim light, I could see her face was flushed. "I have to get back," she said.

We walked together, holding hands, until we got to the plow there on the back of our farm. Then we kissed, and she slipped away.

I wasn't ready to sneak in yet. The events of the last two days and the aching bits of me that Amy Sue brought to life had my brain stirred up, and I knew my bedroom, strewn with crates, would stifle me.

The plowshare lay like an awkward skeleton in the moonlight but I approached it as if it were a living thing. All of the words I'd read that morning came back to me, and I thought about that other boy with my name, and the man he became in that far-off place. I put my hand to the handle and wondered about the blade that this so-called Merlin Trust thought was so all-fired important.

Then I wondered something else, and gripped the wind-worn wood more firmly. Sucking in my breath, I tugged at the plowshare.

When it moved beneath my touch, I nearly fell over.

Clouds blocked the moon for me as I approached the house. A warm wind rose and licked the hairs that still stood up on my neck and arms.

I'd sat by the plow for a goodly time, thinking about it all and wondering what it might mean. Now, as I slipped through the yard, I still wasn't sure. But I'd moved it—three times, to be sure—and each time butter and hot knives came to mind. And wizards and kings.

I was nearly to the trellis leading to my window when I heard the voice.

"They're not who they seem to be," she said. The voice was thick as honey and prettier than a hymn.

I looked around and saw no one.

"A time of despair and great darkness brews," she said. "Another war is coming, and would-be kings are lining up upon the stage." She sighed, and I heard sorrow in it. "How long will your kind glory in blood?"

She spoke again. "It's not theirs to take."

I looked around again, my eyes settling on the well and the pump that squatted over it. My whisper sounded more scared than I wanted it to. "Hello?"

"Over here." Definitely the well. I walked over, my feet feeling suddenly heavy.

"Who's there?"

Her chuckle was warm along my spine. "You know who I am, Arthur."

And I was afraid I did. I said nothing.

"A time of despair and great darkness brews," she said. "Another war is coming, and would-be kings are lining up upon the stage." She sighed, and I heard sorrow in it. "How long will your kind glory in blood?"

But I didn't answer. The fear overtook me and, praying under my breath, I sprinted the dozen yards or so to the house, and scrambled silently up the trellis into my waiting room.

Angry voices woke me from the troubled sleep I finally found. I'd been dreaming about the woman in our well, only she looked a great deal like Amy Sue Peller, naked and shimmering in the dark water, pulling me down beneath the surface as hungry hands moved over me.

But now, I heard my father shouting in the yard, and I climbed into my jeans and boots, grabbing up my shirt. It was early yet—the sky still pink—and my mother watched nervously from the porch. My father had a sheath of papers in one hand and a yellow telegram in the other. He was waving them at my uncle.

"I don't give a good goddamn," my father said. "We need this,

Mordecai. And by hell, you'll sign. It's a good price—more than fair." My father's face was red. He was more angry than I'd seen him since he caught me painting the horse yellow eight years back.

"Mind your tongue, Enoch," Mordecai said in a quiet voice. "I'll not hear blasphemy from you. And I'll not sell my farm to these ravening wolves."

I leaned close to my mother. "How long have they been fighting?"

She shrugged. "They woke me up a bit ago. I'm not sure why your uncle is being so difficult about this. It makes perfect sense to—"

But she stopped in midsentence when my father flung the papers—and then himself—at my uncle. I moved toward them, but she caught my shirt sleeve. "Let them sort this out, Arthur. If your father can't *talk* any sense into him, maybe he can beat it into him instead."

But I think my folks underestimated the wiry, quiet man the war and Jesus had shaped my uncle into. He moved fast, taking a fist on the jaw but easily spinning my father and dropping him with a well-placed boot behind the leg. He pushed him down into the dirt and pinned him there with a knee in his back. I could hear the snarl on the edges of his voice. "The devil's gotten into you, Enoch. You know from the Good Book that the Lord don't look kindly on brothers raising fists to each other."

I tugged at it and felt the blade give way. I heard the groan of steel on rock, and pulled harder, feeling the plow shift and move beneath my hand.

My father struggled and sputtered in the dust, and I knew then that I had to do something.

Setting off at a run, I flew past them and into the barren field. I took no notice of my mother shouting behind me.

"It's not theirs to take," the woman in the well had told me the night before, and what I'd seen that morning told me why. When I got to the plowshare, I went around to the front of it and lifted the harness, winding it around my shoulders and torso.

I tugged at it and felt the blade give way. I heard the groan of steel on rock, and pulled harder, feeling the plow shift and move beneath my hand.

I broke sweat quickly, grunting with the effort as I dragged that plowshare across the open ground. I wasn't sure exactly where I was taking it, but I'd made nearly a mile before I saw the distant dust cloud rising from a car on the road. I stretched as tall as I could, and when I recognized the sedan, I hunkered down and prayed they wouldn't see me.

There, in the shadow of the plow, I looked back over the furrow I'd dug into the earth, and gasped.

A trail of rich, red soil—stark as blood on the sun-baked land—stretched back as far as I could see. It had been two years since I'd seen soil like that on our farm, and now the line of it ran back behind me like a wound in the earth.

And there on the horizon, I saw a figure moving towards me, moving at an easy pace and following the trail I'd left behind me.

I don't know why I thought I could outrun him, but I tried anyway. I gathered up the harness, mindful of the welts it had raised on my back and shoulders, and planted my feet for the pulling.

I'd only gone a few yards when my uncle caught up to me. I looked up when he approached and I saw his bruised jaw. I don't know what I expected him to say, but it surely wasn't what he said. I also didn't expect the low, reverential tone. "They're after the sword, aren't they?"

I tugged at the plow. "Yep," I said. "They took quite a cotton to it."

"It's not theirs to take," he said slowly and I stopped. Our eyes met.

"You've heard her, too?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Yesterday when I was at prayer and chores. Lord knows I'm no Papist, but when the Mother of Christ speaks, it's right and proper to listen."

I thought about correcting him, offering up a bit of what I'd read at the library, but thought better of it. He'd think such to be nonsense at best, or Satan's handiwork at worst. "What should I do?"

He scratched his head, and looked at the swath of fresh, dark soil. I followed his gaze to the plow. The blade shone fiercely, contrasting nearly white against the red soil. "Years and years of trying with the mule, and a boy breaks it loose all on his own. I reckon you're the one to decide what to do." He chuckled and glanced back to the furrow. "I also reckon you've already decided."

The truth is, I hadn't—at least not that I was aware of. But as I looked around me, I realized the direction I'd chosen to pull in, and could see the last bits of green scrub on the banks of Piker's Creek a half-mile off, shimmering in the sun.

I remembered the books, remembered the pictures of the graceful hand and the shining sword, thrust up from the calm surface of that long-ago lake. Then, the full weight of it all settled onto me when I considered the freshly healed land.

Until now, the blade had seemed a thorn in our otherwise peaceable lives, bringing my father and uncle to blows, threatening to separate me from my girl, even bringing down the G-men from Oklahoma City with their big city shoes and their discomfort with the dust that dominated our lives these last few years. Suddenly, possibilities stretched before me, and I saw the land healed, Amy Sue Peller smiling with pride and love, cheering me on with my folks and the teeming crowd as I pulled at the plow and brought back the corn.

It's not theirs to take.

Maybe, I realized, it wasn't mine to take either. And maybe, just maybe, a hand waited for us there in the last trickling water of Piker's Creek.

I knew it was the last time I would ever hear that voice, but I didn't mind. And I knew there would be hell to pay back at the farm, once my father calmed down and once the federals visiting from Oklahoma City were called to fetch the four strangers.

I looked in the direction of the house, and saw that the dust cloud was on the move again. Uncle Mordecai saw it, too. He stepped up to the front of the plow. "We'd better pull together," he said.

He wrapped leather around his hands and over his shoulder, digging his own boots into the ground beside mine. For a moment, I thought maybe it wouldn't budge, resisting any hand but my own, but as we both tugged at it, the plow bit into the earth and followed us.

Step by step, we pulled with our eyes down and our backs bent, halving the distance again before we heard the car approaching behind us.

I glanced over my shoulder, and then looked at my uncle. "We have to get to the creek," I told him.

"We're not going to make it," he answered. He stood up straight, and dropped the harness.

The car rumbled up to us, and the doors opened. My father and the four blue-turbaned men stepped out.

"What in the hell are you up to, Arthur Lee Bach," he said. He glared at his brother, and I saw something in his eyes that frightened me.

"He's doing what needs done," Mordecai said. "If you've any sense left in you, you'll help us."

"I don't think that is advisable." The old, gold-toothed man reached calmly beneath his jacket, and I remembered the shoulder holsters. "I think I can help with this little misunderstanding."

"They have guns," I whispered, and my uncle said nothing. But he moved with that quiet speed I'd seen earlier.

The old man fell beneath him, the blue gem flying up into the air and dropping with a thud near my foot. I stooped to grab it as two of the others lunged at me, and then I tumbled over, tangled up in their arms and legs as they tackled me. I got my fingers around the stone and pulled it close to myself, feeling the fists and feet that pummeled me. We scrambled in the dirt, and I was dimly aware of my father pulling at my uncle where he wrestled with the old man.

When my uncle finally came up, he held a black pistol in his hand. He pointed it first at my father, and then at the old man. "Call off your kraut friends," he said. The anger in his voice was coiled like a sidewinder.

The old man smiled. "I can assure you that we're not—"

The pistol cracked, and the front window of the car exploded.

Eyes narrow, the old man said something in that language I hadn't recognized before. The men holding me let go suddenly, and I crawled free, the blue gem clenched tight in my fist.

"Danke," my uncle said with a grin.

After stripping them of their pistols, we tied them up—even my father—with the rope we found in the trunk of their car.

"I'll wait with them," my uncle said. "You go on with what you need to do."

Their leader looked to both of us. "You're making a tremendous mistake."

I looked at him. "We already know it's not yours to take. The Lady told us."

Color drained from his face. "What Lady?"

My uncle opened his mouth to speak, but I was faster. "I think you know what Lady."

The man glowered, and spat between my feet. "A new Reich arises," he said. "That blade is meant for the chosen among its princes."

"No," I said, as I took up the harness again. "It's not yours to take. And it's not ours to give."

If anything further was said, I didn't listen. I put one foot in front of the other, and set out for Piker's Creek.

When I reached the bank and dropped the straps, I looked over my shoulder and saw my uncle waving. Then, I looked back to the narrow creek and its wide, stone-strewn bed. I reached for the plow, put my hands upon it and paused.

I thought about the red and ready soil that stretched out behind me, and how the blue in the gem in my pocket matched the blue in Amy Sue Peller's eyes. I thought about my father and his curled fists and easy lies, my uncle and his gentle gait and quiet ways. I thought about the four men in their strange hats, their so-called Merlin Trust and rising Reich.

I lifted at the handles and tipped the plow over the bank. It fell end over end, the leather straps slapping at the rocks and brush as it rolled, the wood cracking but not breaking. When it reached the bottom, the plow came to a stop, and the shining white blade buried itself into what remained of the creek.

Even though I expected it, when the hands surged up from the water to break Excalibur loose from its frame, I jumped back. The slender arms were alabaster, and strong enough to splinter the hard wood as she tugged the sword free and homeward.

"Thank you, Arthur," she said.

I knew it was the last time I would ever hear that voice, but I didn't mind. And I knew there would be hell to pay back at the farm, once my father calmed down and once the federals visiting from Oklahoma City were called to fetch the four strangers.

But I also knew we wouldn't be selling the farm. Ever. And I knew later that night I'd see Amy Sue Peller, and that if I could learn the trick of it, the blue gem in my pocket would make all things right and good for everyone.

And maybe someday, I thought, as I turned back to where my uncle and the others hunkered down near the car, instead of pulling plows out of boulders, I'd try my hand at another kind of magic.

Maybe I'd pull rabbits from hats.

Narrative of a Beast's Life

by Cat Rambo
Illustrated by Alan M. Clark

Humans were given dominion over beasts, were they not? So why has this manuscript been suppressed?

Part I

An account of my family and village—our circumstances—childhood pastimes—Bozni's fate—Adrato's lesson

Like many of my fellow Beasts, I was born to freedom, in a small village named Dekalion, the confluence of five centaur herds. The youngest of seven, I was a favorite of my family, not just of my parents and siblings, but of my aunts, uncles, and cousins as well. They named me Fino, which means "Quickwitted" in my milk tongue, and I grew up in an atmosphere of love and encouragement that any Human child might envy.

Since many have asked me of that initial society, I will set down what I remember of life there. Our village resided in the shade of sandstone cliffs, which overlooked plains of acacia trees and brambles. My people hunted, and the men had farms of cassava and gourds, corn and plantains.

The village was located three or four days inland from the sea, and only a scant number of our women went to trade on the coast or with other neighboring settlements. Only bold women, past their first childbearing and used to fighting, because slavers were common. The traders traveled in groups of five or six, armed with bows and spears, and took goods: bark cloth, carved water gourds, reed baskets. They brought back bright cottons and bits of metal, and sometimes dried fish, tasting of salt and smoke and unfamiliar spices.

When I was a child, my favorite playmate was Bozni, a clever boy perhaps a year younger than myself. We played together, along with our fellows, under the watchful eye of an elderly centaur, Adrato. In the hot afternoons, he was prone to falling asleep in the shade, and we would play where we liked while he drowsed.

The town was a series of huts, woven of thorn and branches, thatched with grass. In the morning, pairs of centaurs would take clay jugs to fill them in the mud-colored river that ran near the village.

This river was not a safe place, and we children were forbidden to go near its shores, which naturally rendered them the most desirable of playgrounds in our eyes. We learned that dangling a branch over the deeper pools might bring a grim-jawed crocodile boiling out of the water.

While leaning out over a pool with a branch one day, Bozni was snatched by such a monster. The rest of the children screamed and ran for help, but I leaped forward, trying in vain to pull him from the reptile's maw. I took up the fallen branch and beat the creature about the head, Bozni shouting and screaming all the while.

Alas! Try as I might, the crocodile withdrew further into the water, where it spun itself sideways several times as quickly as a child's top. Bozni thrashed past in the foaming water—I believe he perished early in those moments, but the crocodile continued to shake the corpse.

I stood horrified, staring into the reddening river, and caught a last glimpse of his ensanguined face, barely visible against the water's rusty color. By the time Adrato came galloping up, summoned by the others, Bozni was gone.

Adrato demanded an account of what had transpired, and forbore his anger at my inability to express the horrific scene I had just witnessed. Bit by bit, he coaxed the tale from me.

At its conclusion, we stared at each other for a long moment. He took me by the shoulder and pointed a doleful finger at the river. By now, the current had washed away any stain from the glistening banks, although the dents and troughs dug in the mud by the frantic action of Bozni's legs bore testament to the struggle.

"That is the price of disobedience," Adrato said sternly, and shook me once or twice. His demeanor impressed me so gravely that it would not be until I was an adult that I fully realized that in some cases, the price of obedience might prove still more costly. I was free then, as I said, and a child. I did not understand many things, and so I swore I would always obey, lest I meet Bozni's fate.

Part II

My early education—anticipation of a hunt—a raid in the night by Shifters—my capture—our journey

We children were taught mathematics, which I took to with great delight and facility of mind. We learned nothing of the written word, but we were taught to calculate with cabi, which means "counting beads," carved of ivory and strung on cords.

The arts of hunting and self-defense were also taught to us. When a centaur youth came of age, he or she would kill a lion in order to receive the tattoos of adulthood along their arms and chest. As the day for my hunt came nearer, dreams of what was to happen filled all my nights. I made two spears for the purpose, and Adrato promised me an iron knife for the occasion.

But a week before the ritual was to take place, a slaving clan of Shifters—who sometimes walked in two-legged form, and other times ran as hyenas—attacked us. Our traders had left that morning, and our attackers must have been watching for that signal. In the darkest hours of the night, they set fire to several huts and shouted angrily beside the windows, thrusting spears inward at the sleepers, before withdrawing.

In the confusion, amid the noise and flames, I ran in the wrong direction, fetching up against a fence and knocking myself sharply on the head. I reeled away into the darkness outside the village walls, and found myself seized by rough hands, which pulled sacking down over my head, obscuring my vision and binding my arms. I kicked out, but my captors quickly secured me, and I found myself trussed and thrown on a cart with several others. We tried to ascertain each other's identity, but savage blows rained down on us with imprecations and commands for silence. The cart trundled into motion and we rumbled away.

The next few days we traveled in this manner. My companions in captivity were revealed as three other youths, ranging in age from myself, my age-mates Tsura and Kali, and an older boy named Flik. We tested our bonds, but our captors were evidently well-experienced at their brutal profession. They watered us and fed us with grain porridge, but so little that we were weakened by hunger and tormented by thirst, along with biting flies that crawled over us as we jostled along in the miserably hot sun.

Sometimes I tried to convince myself that my family would come for me, but at least a week would pass before our traders returned from their mission. They were the only ones brave enough to dare searching for us, but by the time they were set on our trail, it would be cold.

Part III

We are taken to market—I am sold to a new master—our journey and its hardships—a garden feast—the sphinx's name—we come to Samophar and are taken aboard ship

We were taken to a market in a city. None of us had ever seen such a place before and there were sights and sounds and smells such as I had never witnessed. The buildings were made of clay brick, laid together so snugly that no mortar or cement was necessary. Some buildings were built on top of each other, and stairs meant for no centaur led up and down the outside.

Here we were sold, each to separate masters. Mine fastened me in a coffle with other beings: a sphinx of that city that had committed murder, two djinni, and a snake-headed woman. Oxen drew the cart to which we were shackled, and chained on it was a dragon, not a large one, but some eight feet in length. A small herd of goats marched behind us in turn, intended for the dragon's sustenance.

When a centaur youth came of age, he or she would kill a lion in order to receive the tattoos of adulthood along their arms and chest.

We traveled northward for three days, during which I picked up a scattering of my comrades' languages, and they of mine. The dragon, as it chanced, spoke the sphinx's tongue. As they talked back and forth, I listened and tried to make sense of what they said. I could not assemble the dragon's words into meaning, but they drove the sphinx to silent tears. She wept all day and well into the night, and did not speak again for days.

I had never seen a sphinx before, and when at last she could be coaxed into speech, I gave her my name and tried to learn her own. But my companions informed me that no sphinx speaks their name outside their own kind. I was much amazed at this strange practice, for it was the first time I realized that it was not simply places that differed from those I had known, but customs as well.

The djinni were kindly disposed towards me, saying that I reminded them of their own child, who had been sold away from them. They tried to give me a portion of their food, but I refused it, even though it tempted me sorely. They were as hungry as I, and I had no right to deprive them. I thought it unfair that one creature should eat while another starved, even then before I had seen how bitter injustice might be.

On the second day, we came across a village that lay in ashes. Its living inhabitants were all gone, but here and there in the blackened ruins were corpses: long-armed apes and centaurs like myself. Our master allowed us to forage in the gardens, although we were kept chained together, rendering walking laborious. While much was trampled, I found some yams there and put them in a sack I found to one side, along with stalks of sugar cane, two lemons, and a handful of orange fruit that I had never seen before, sized to match my thumb tip, thin-skinned, and full of a sour savor. We roasted our pickings in the guards' fire that night, and considered ourselves to be dining as well as royalty.

The next day we came to a seaport, which a passerby told us, in answer to our entreaties, was Samophar. Here the larger buildings were made of white stone and the streets underfoot were paved with yellow brick. Fat-bellied ships rode at anchor in the harbor, and we realized that our owner intended to sell us

away from our homeland.

I had never seen so much water. I stared at it, imagining crocodiles beneath the glittering surface. At the docks, we were passed over to a ship's master. I witnessed other slaves being loaded onto the ship, and saw the weeping of several families being parted.

Here a sad incident came to pass. The two djinni were chained together and contrived to jump into the waves. The woman drowned before they could be drawn up out of the water, and the husband was savagely beaten by the sailors, angry at the trouble he had afforded. Try as I might, despite the blows aimed my way, I could not force my way up the gangplank at first, but the djinni's blood, his cries, forced me, lest I push them to such lengths, for I knew they would have no mercy.

Below decks, I found myself amidst a throng of other captives, including dog-men from the east, ghouls, several griffins, a family of harpies, ogres, unicorns, and a rakshasa. Above decks, I could hear the roaring of the dragon as it was chained into place and we set underway.

Part IV

The voyage—we are rebuked by the sphinx—I am given a new name—the fate of a cyclops

Brutality was a common practice of the Human crew towards the cargo. They affected to despise the Beasts they conveyed, and yet they used us venially as they desired, particularly the ogre women. Few of the crew did not undertake such practices, either with each other or with the miserable captives in their care.

We were given a measure of gruel and water each day, which our keepers were not careful to hand out. Some bullies among us made it their practice to take the provisions of those who were sick or otherwise unable to defend what was rightfully their own. After a few such incidents, though, the sphinx spoke to us. Those who could understand her words rendered them into other tongues, and then others translated them in turn, so a constant subdued whisper spread outward from her throughout the cramped hold.

She discoursed most remarkably in her deep, grave voice. She said that as thinking beings, we owed each other civil treatment, and that it was the duty of the strong to protect the weak from the worst of our common oppression. She looked at each face in turn with her great brown eyes, and some faltered under that stare.

After that, the bullies seemed abashed. From then on, we kept better order among ourselves, despite the taunts and jeers of the sailors, who were angered by such behavior. It was as though it were a reproach that their captives might act more civilized than they. But we knew that without such acts, we had nothing.

Not even our names were our own. During the journey we were given new names, chosen by the Captain from a book which he carried as he walked the levels below decks, trailed by two sailors, pointing and giving each the appellation by which they were to be known from then forward.

The sound he gave me seemed strange and unrepeatable. Phil-lip. But the sailor behind him paused and said the name aloud to me and made me repeat it back until he was satisfied and moved on to the next beast. Phillip. Resentment blazed in my chest, for it was not my name, not the name by which my parents and beloved siblings had known me. Was that not part of who I was—my very innermost nature? My name. Phil-lip.

But I did not give voice to my objections, for I had seen the example made of a resistor. A monstrous cyclops, who was incongruously soft-spoken to the point where one must strain their ears to hear him, proved quite adamant on the subject of his name, refusing the one given him—Jeremy—and was beaten till he "should acknowledge it," which rather proved to be the point where he fainted and pails of sea water thrown on his face failed to revive him. He died two days later.

As the days passed, the realization struck me that I was moving away from my home, and that even should I escape my servitude, I would yet find myself in a strange land, where I knew no one to help me. Despondent at the thought, I refused to eat, and gradually sank into a deep melancholy. It was evident that the sailors cared not whether I lived or died. but the Captain, who had a financial investment in his piteous cargo, forced them to shift me up onto deck in the sunshine and wind. I was placed towards the aft of the ship, in a somewhat sheltered spot, with several other invalids also deemed to be in danger of being carried away by their maladies.

One of these we knew doomed: a tree spirit named Malva, who faded with each mile stretching between herself and her tree. The Captain swore greatly upon discovering the nature of her malady, for the seller had deliberately not warned him. She was the sweetest of souls, and it was painful to watch her skin grow dull where once it had been luminous. The strands of her hair fell prey to the sea winds, which snatched them away day by day and bore them who knows where.

After a week and a half of this existence, Malva finally breathed her last. The Captain lost no time disposing of the corpse overboard, and I forbore to watch, lest I see the gray sharks that followed us quarreling and tearing over the body.

The ghouls pleaded to be allowed to dispose of the corpse, as they did each time some unfortunate passed away. The Captain

Brutality was a common practice of the Human crew towards the cargo. They affected to despise the Beasts they conveyed, and yet they used us venially as they desired, particularly the ogre women.

The bidding for the dragon came fast and furious. At length it was sold and dragged away. The bidding was shorter in my case, and after a quick interchange, I was shoved in line behind my purchaser.

said he did not like to cultivate their habits, and for the most part they were denied fresh meat, except for such occasions as they were able to hide someone's death below decks.

In doing so, they did not have to hide their activities so much from the sailors, who paid us as little attention as they could, as from their fellows, most of whom objected to the thought of being disposed of in such a gruesome wise, although those entirely resigned to their fate said they did not mind being eaten by the ghouls.

Once again, Providence stepped in. Prompted by a chance fondness for my form and face, another being intervened and saved me from following Malva's dreadful fate. The cook, Petro, was a fat man who had once worked in a racing stable. He confided in me that his great desire had been to be a jockey, and that when, at the age of twelve, he had realized that his frame would outstrip a rider's dimensions, he had run away to sea in despair.

Only Petro's nursing me with what fresh fruit he had stored away kept me alive. He took me as his pet, and delighted in asking for stories about my village and the Beasts I had encountered in the course of my travels. He was fascinated with the equine part of my body, and would groom and caress it, while avoiding that part which seemed Human to him.

I went so far as to offer him my real name, but he shook his head and insisted that I must think of myself as Phillip from now on, else I might expect to gather unnecessary punishment on myself.

He explained to me that the world was divided into Humans and Beasts, and that the Gods had given Humans dominion over Beasts, which meant that such creatures could not own themselves, and only be the possession of Humans. He would have offered to buy me, he assured me, except that I was far outside his meager savings. He spoke of the highness of my price as a good thing, because it ensured that someone wealthy, who would be able to maintain me well, would be my purchaser.

The dragon was kept at the very back of the ship, which was reckoned less imperiled by its flames. Most of the time its jaws were kept prisoned, but at dawn and dusk, they would release its mouth to feed it a goat from the dwindling herd and let it drink its fill of water. The diet did not suit its bowels, and by the end of the trip, the back of the ship was covered with its gelid feces, despite the sailors' best efforts to keep it scrubbed free of the substance, which burned bare skin exposed to it.

As we went north, the weather became more and more winterlike. We all found the cold and damp excruciating. Clothing and blankets were at a premium, and many traded favors or begged bits of clothing from the sailors. Petro gave me his second-best jacket, which he said he had grown too paunchy for. It hung loose on me, but I was glad of the overabundance of the fabric.

We did not sit out on the deck anymore, and so I did not witness our approach to the port of Tabat. Waiting in the darkness, I strained my ears to make out what I could: the cries of gulls, echoed by the shouts of Humans, the creak of the ship's timbers and the swish of water, the slap of waves.

When I left the ship, Petro had tears in his eyes as he waved to me, but I did not think much of him. All my worries were engaged by what was to come. Under the watchful eye of the Captain, we made our way down the gangplank that led from the ship to the dock, shivering in the bitter sea wind, uncertain of our fate.

Part V

We arrive in Tabat—the fate of the dragon—I am sold—my new mistress—I am taken to Piper Hill

We were driven to a vast marketplace, a single roof stretched across hundreds of feet, and six raised platforms where the Beasts and each platform's Human auctioneer stood. Inside the walls, among the press of the crowd, it was much warmer, so warm that I felt in danger of fainting. The crowd pressed on every side, and the smells were oppressive.

I saw the sphinx and others of my fellow captives sold. Then came the dragon, which they hauled up onto the block in chains. The great iron muzzle was clamped around its jaws so it still could not speak, but it rolled its eyes in fury, and tried to flap its wings.

Alas! It had been denuded of those members, and only stumps remained, treated with cautery and tar bandages. At the time, I wondered at the savagery of such a gesture, and later learned it is customary with Beasts that possess the power of flight, lest they come loose, since in such cases they invariably fly away as quickly as they can.

The bidding for the dragon came fast and furious. At length it was sold and dragged away. The bidding was shorter in my case, and after a quick interchange, I was shoved in line behind my purchaser.

She was a lean woman with dark hair worn in an ornate braid wrapped around her head. Her skin was darker than my own, and she was significantly shorter. She gestured at me to follow her, flanked by her guard, a shaggy-headed minotaur who eyed me wordlessly. His arms were as big around as my chest, or so it seemed to me.

She bought another Beast, a dog-man. He and I walked in new sets of chains behind a cart heaped with produce and other

goods. I did not speak his language, nor he mine, and so we did not communicate much as we progressed along. At noon, we stopped to rest, and the woman and minotaur ate lunch, although only drinks from a water skin were given to the dog-man and me.

We arrived at our destination by early evening. A series of white-washed buildings sat atop a cliffside overlooking a small river. The house seemed quite grand to me at the time, but after I had lived there for some time, I came to see that they were older, and had not been well tended. The bushes in the once lavish garden were overgrown, and in places the faster-growing ones had choked back the shyer, less-assuming plants. The garden grew all manner of medicinal herbs—some outright, others hidden between tree roots or in the shadows of the crumbling rock wall. The outer walls were shaggy with peeling paint, and the gutters drooped as though unable to bear the slightest thought of rain. This was Piper Hill, my new home, which it has remained until now.

Part VI

Jolietta begins my training—I am broken to harness—Brutus and Cassius—the dwarf dragons—I am sent out to work—I fall ill—I speak my feelings and am punished

I soon grew settled into life at Piper Hill. I set about learning the language as quickly as I could, stung by both Jolietta's scorn and her lash when she did not think I was applying myself as hard as I could. Jolietta showed me how to work in tandem with another centaur that she had in her stables, named Michael.

You would think that an intelligent creature would have little trouble with the concept of the harness, but the truth is that it required strength and dexterity that had not been developed in me by all my confined days aboard the slave ship.

My physical dexterity was also hampered by my injuries. The day after we arrived at the estate, Jolietta had me tied and whipped until the blood flowed. She told me that we should begin as we meant to go on, and that to disobey her would be to get whipped again.

She demanded to know if I understood her. By now I could make out what she said, for it was the same language many of the sailors had spoken. She went on to tell me my name would continue to be Phillip, as that was the name written on my papers of ownership, but that if I dissatisfied her, she was quite capable of changing my name to something much more degrading.

By way of example, she was in the process of training an oracular pig, and she called that unfortunate being "Thing" and insisted that we all do the same, although the information quickly passed among us that the pig's birth name was Tirza.

I watched Tirza's training in tandem with my own, and found her sullen example a warning sign of my fate should I rebel too overtly. Like most of her kind, Tirza could speak aloud, as though she were Human, a clear soprano which I had the pleasure of hearing sing on several occasions. She was a good enough soul when one spoke to her outside of Jolietta's training, but few of us dared hold such conversations, for fear of the beatings that we would be given if we were caught offering the miserable creature solace, either spoken or material.

I respected the two minotaur guards that Jolietta had with her almost constantly as she went about the estate on her daily business: Brutus and Cassius. It had been Cassius who had gone with her on her buying trip. Neither of them deigned to speak to the other household Beasts, other than to pass along their mistress's orders or reprimand us if we mis-served them in some way. They had been with Jolietta, I was told, since they were still calves.

Other members of the household were an orangutan, two dryads belonging to nearby trees, a satyr, two dog-men who worked in the stable, an old troll who served as cook, and Bebe, a fat old centaur mare who oversaw the household and was greatly trusted by Jolietta. Bebe was a sly creature, and I quickly learned to confide nothing in her, for she was fond of earning treats and favors from Jolietta by paying with small betrayals—or sometimes much larger—of the other servants.

The satyr, Hedonus, professed himself content in his role. He said when he had first been captured and sold, he had worked in the Southern Isles in a salt-making establishment. The Isles were not conducive to health. Hedonus said each year one out of every ten slaves died, and that this death rate, which was better than most, was reckoned to be due to a mixture of lime juice and sulfur that the overseer forced his workers to drink each morning. By contrast to the salt pond, Jolietta's establishment was luxury indeed, he implied in conversation, more than once, and Bebe seemed to feel the same.

The second day of the watch, I was so tired that I fell asleep, and woke only when I heard the croaking from a female dragon that announced her progeny.

There were others who might not have agreed. Workers served on the estate, and a larger group was hired out as needed. These groups were somewhat fluid—servants out of favor might find themselves hired out and conversely a hired worker who did well might find themselves purchased as part of the household or estate workers. While the household servants lived within the house itself and ate in its kitchen, the others lived in small cabins erected at the back of the estate.

Although the household accommodations were severe, they were luxurious by contrast with these cabins, which were caulked ineffectually with mud and cloth against the severities of the wind. I have stood in one during a storm and heard the whole cabin singing, as though it were nothing but a musical instrument for the wind to sound as it would.

Mistress Jolietta also raised what are called dwarf dragons, though they are not properly dragons. The wealthy in that area used them for sport hunting. A single one could kill a creature ten times its size, and a pack of them could bring down anything. These she set me to feeding each day, which meant that I must butcher two goats and several dozen chickens every morning. Tender-hearted, I wept whenever I killed the goats, until Jolietta caught me at it and beat me for my tears. After that, I steeled my heart and killed each animal as though it were nothing more than wood made animate and bleating.

The dragons, of which there were a halfdozen or so, were kept in a great pen set against the cliff face which also functioned as the rubbish heaps for the estate, for the dragons preferred to nest in such, and let the baking heat combined with the sun brood their eggs. The trees had been cut back so the sunlight could fully enter the pen, and it was a malodorous and noisome place where few cared to go. I took advantage of this to seek solitude in which to heal my injured spirit. I would sit thinking and listening to the rasp of the lizards' lovemaking—a sandpaper scrape that never seemed to cease, even when eggs were being laid in the pits scraped atop each heap of trash and nightsoil.

Under Jolietta's tutelage, I learned the difference between the various methods of punishment: the searing flay of cat-tails, the bitter blow of a cow-hide whip, the thud of a rod against scarred flesh.

The dragons were worth a deal of money, I gathered. There were two clutches ready to hatch, and Jolietta set me to watching over them at night, sitting up with a torch, waiting to see any motion on a mother dragon's part that would betoken a hatching taking place.

The second day of the watch, I was so tired that I fell asleep, and woke only when I heard the croaking from a female dragon that announced her progeny.

The tiny animals crawled out from under their mother's watchful eye and headed for the shelter of the bale of straw Jolietta had directed me to put within a few paces of the heap.

One crawled beneath me, and I raised my foot, thinking to crush it and thus deprive my owner of a fine sum of money. But it was such a pretty little thing, only a foot long, with fine mottled patterns distinct and new along its scaly sides, and so I stayed my hoof and let it crawl into the straw. Dwarf dragons are as unthinking as animals, so I did not speak to it, now or then.

Those eggs hatched fine, but the other batch did not, and when this became evident due to the length of time that had passed, Jolietta held me accountable and beat me. While she had me beneath the lash, I cried out, saying that she had no right to do such a thing to me, and that I would run away, as soon as I was able. She merely laughed at me. We both knew every hand would be against a runaway Beast.

It would not be the last time she beat me, or that I saw another servant beaten. A small hut crouched towards the back of the estate, a great hook set dangling from its blackened roof beams. She would suspend the unfortunate victim by the wrists from this hook and the rest of the household would be assembled in order to watch and learn from their unfortunate fellow's example.

Under Jolietta's tutelage, I learned the difference between the various methods of punishment: the searing flay of cat-tails, the bitter blow of a cow-hide whip, the thud of a rod against scarred flesh. Like other Humans I had met, she felt that the sooner examples were made, and the sooner a captive resigned to its life of servitude and toil, the better for all parties concerned.

Food was a constant worry among the Beasts of the household, although we did not live half so badly as the Beasts who were hired out to work on surrounding farms. They were given two pecks of corn and a pound of dried fish each week, and counted themselves better off than most. Nonetheless, they tried their best to be hired by the masters known for feeding their workers well, and the household Beasts smuggled out what they could of food. Most of the time, though, we ate the same mash and boiled vegetables that the Humans in the household, mainly Jolietta and her apprentices, consumed.

On the western edge of the estate there was a stand of apple trees. Jolietta allowed us to pick these as we would, for she disliked the taste of the fruit, and would watch one of us gobble a piece down, amazement evident on her face as she made loud remarks regarding how she did not understand how we might stomach such noisome provender. Despite this talk, we ate the apples with relish, for they were sweet and full of savor, and what was not eaten was dried and put aside against the winter.

We were severely punished if transgressions were discovered. At one point, directed to throw out some burned soup, I tried to scrape it into some sacking for transport to a work slave who was ailing. Jolietta found me at it and forced me to eat the cold, burned mass there and then, before stringing me up for the lash. The food was the entirety of what I was given for the next three days.

I learned that in Tabat, there were individuals known as Beast farmers—Humans who held the titles to Beasts by law but left the Beasts alone, to make their own way in the world or sometimes pay the farmer a weekly portion of their income.

Some did this out of the goodness of their hearts, while others chose to make their daily living in such a partnership, being too lazy or otherwise disinclined to keep the strict grasp that a slavekeeping arrangement would entail.

But for a Beast to belong to such a farmer, they must manage

The beating I had earned was a savage one indeed. Afterwards, Jolietta let me hang by the wrists throughout the night.

to save up a sum to give the farmer, with which to buy them—and this sum was inordinate indeed. Nonetheless, I began to put aside such small coins as fell my way.

Part VII

***Visitors to the estate—my friendship with the sphinx—I learn to read—I am trained as a physician—I escape and am caught—I father a* number of children—I begin writing this account**

Other creatures constantly passed in and out of Jolietta's kingdom, either in the process of being trained or nursed. I nursed litters of dog-men and groomed gryphons being trained for the Tabatian cavalry. Many institutions sent their ailing Beasts to Jolietta for doctoring. The sphinx had been purchased by the College of Mages, and when she fell prey to cough, the College sent her to Jolietta's farm to be nursed back to health with boxes of heated sand and horehound and pinetop tea. Jolietta allowed me to care for the sphinx, and over the month she spent there at Piper Hill, we became fast friends. Even after her departure, we passed messages back and forth as we could.

Jolietta thought me intelligent enough to absorb some knowledge of healing. I learned to identify and pull bad teeth, to apply leeches, and to administer medicine to Beasts. She taught me the names and methods of the different preparations, and had me smell and taste each of them so I would know them in the future.

She said that if I learned quickly, she would be able to trust me with errands to outlying farms, to tend creatures too ill to be fetched to her.

As a result of learning such things, I taught myself to read and write, although my hand was poor and unpracticed. Still, I worked at improving my understanding of the art where I could, stealing pamphlets and magazines to read, hiding them away in a shed near the dragon pens.

I made it my practice not to speak much, but my mistress caught something suspicious in my demeanor, and watched my actions jealously. Aware of the scrutiny, I took care to make no move that would confirm her fears. Indeed, I was a model slave, unobtrusive as a piece of furniture, quick to anticipate her wants and desires. I had feared that I might be put in a brothel, for the sailors on the ship said that most Beasts of my kind ended up under such circumstances. And to do her credit, Jolietta never spoke word or made gesture that led me to think she desired sexual congress with me.

Time wore on, and I grew from my spindly youth to a broad-shouldered male. While Bebe had no interest in me, the same was not true for many of the centaur mares in the area, along with a few of the Human women. The dryads liked for me to kiss them, and stroke them with my hands, and we spent many hours in this wise, but the mares were what I ached for.

Jolietta forbade me congress, saying that the owners should have to pay well for my seed, but I managed to defy her more than once, and blame the outcome on my nature. Jolietta thought, as most Humans did, that Beasts were inevitable prey to their natures, and that I could not help taking an opportunity at congress with a mare in heat any more than I could help eating when I was hungry and food presented itself.

At first I tried to ensure that my loves produced no progeny, but when a mare is fertile, Nature takes its course, and soon enough a child results. When I realized this, I attempted to deny myself such pleasures, but I was young and easily swayed by my body's yearnings. And so, within a few years, I had a number of colts, both purchased and gratis, in the surrounding area, and I experienced the first pangs of seeing a child sold away from me, when a neighbor parted with mare and colt to a trader who took them northward to Verranzo's City.

Those who advocate slavery would deny such familial bonds. Surely they have never seen a mother, wailing and lashed by despair more harshly than any cat-o'-nine-tails, trying in vain to reach to her infant! The child stands, uncertain and blinking, sensing the sorrow to come, and then is driven ever more frantic by his dam's remonstrations! More than once such a sight has torn with an eagle's claws at my heart.

After several years of my studying as a physician, Jolietta began to take me with her when she paid visits to check on Beasts, and I would administer medicine or treatments under her watchful eye. Several of the freeholders asked her if she meant to geld me, and she spoke forthrightly, saying that centaurs of good frame sold well, and that she reckoned she would have good fat breeding fees of me.

"Ain't you afraid that will leave him too feisty?" one demanded, and she shrugged.

"It would be a poor advertisement for my training skills if I did not trust in them," she said.

By the time she began to put me out to stud on a regular basis, my lost children ate at me. I saw their sad faces in my dreams at night, and whenever I encountered one of their mothers on a visit, I glimpsed only reproach in her eyes. What would it be like, I thought, to live in a place where I might be part of a herd. Where I might sire children and teach them as I had been taught, how to sing, how to wield a spear, how to count on cabi.

Driven by such fantasies, I entertained thoughts of escape. While passing through a farmhouse kitchen, I had the opportunity to steal a knife that sat waiting to cut pieces of a ham. While I found out later that my theft caused a great hubbub, suspicion did not land on me. I kept my weapon out in the garden, tucked beneath a little-used bench, and waited a few weeks to make sure that no late suspicions would lead to Jolietta

searching my chamber, as happened from time to time.

I put food aside, mainly oat rusks that I stole from the kitchen, and dried apples given me by the work Beasts. I stitched a pack out of burlap stolen from the stable, and read through Jolietta's almanac to discover the next night when moonlight would be sufficient to see at night. I kept my eyes open for other items that would not be missed, hoping for a torch or lantern, but fate did not provide such.

I knew from reading the newspaper that if I made my way north to Verranzo's City, I might find souls willing to shelter me, and eventually send me west, where the Humans were few. I did not know much of the territory that lay in my way, but I figured I might head for the coast and then work my way up along it towards that haven.

Accordingly, I left late at night, creeping out from my quarters in the stable. Under the cover of darkness, I made my way along the deserted road to the place where its cliffs overlooked the sea, and then made my way north and east from there. In the hour when dawn fingered the sky, I found a patch of woodland between fields and sheltered in its depths—the lush grass testified that only deer and smaller wildlife came there. I found a bed beneath a fallen pine and slept, dreaming of freedom, among the smell of the rotting brown needles.

My hope was that in the morning, I would not be missed, since Jolietta would think I had gone to slaughter game and feed the dragons. The day was bright and sunny, and would render the dragons torpid and unlikely to complain much—I had fed them early and more than their usual the day before, and they customarily gorged themselves and then did not eat for several days. And in those hours while I was not missed, traffic would pass back and forth along the road, muddling and—hopefully—destroying my scent so hounds would not be able to trace me to my hiding place.

I was far enough away from the road that I could not hear the traffic or conversation there, and while once or twice I thought I heard the baying of hounds, carried on the wind, I was never certain. When evening came and I could move in the shadows, hiding whenever I came across another traveler, I continued to move up along the coast.

I traveled in this way for three days, living off the rusks in my pouch and food stolen from gardens where I could. On the fourth night, I heard pursuit behind me and the cries of hounds, which grew louder and louder. Jolietta had anticipated my path, and had been waiting for it to coincide with her patrols. She tracked me into a ravine, where I slipped and slid in the clay and mud, unable to find traction. Cassius climbed down and tied me with ropes before he and Brutus drew me up out of the rocky cleft by means of pulleys.

The beating I had earned was a savage one indeed. Afterwards, Jolietta let me hang by the wrists throughout the night. I lay insensible for two days afterward, and then resumed my duties.

From that point forward, I kept any thoughts of escape to myself. I was resolved that in the end, I would, but that next time I would be far better prepared.

My life in general improved as a result of my quiet demeanor, for I was determined to betray no sign of my intended, inevitable rebellion to my mistress. Jolietta allowed me better food, and the cook instructed me in culinary techniques that I might find useful in tempting the appetite of a patient or the mistress at some point. I learned how to create trifles and frumenties, soufflés and omelets, and a variety of nogs and creams and soups of medicinal nature.

Where for many, years of interaction would engender trust, Jolietta grew more and more suspicious of my motives as time passed. She stopped sending me out on errands by myself, saying that I had fathered as many free colts as she cared me to, and she would no longer allow me in the still-room, where she kept her herbs and medicines, by myself.

Word came to me through other slaves that in Tabat, one of the Human presses had devoted itself to the cause of abolition, and wished to receive accounts of the lives of Beasts, in order to speak on their behalf to those who insisted that they should remain subject, incapable of governing themselves. And so I sat down to write, and penned the first part of this tale and sent it by secret means to the newspaper.

A month later, by the same means in reverse, a newspaper arrived in my room. I unfolded its stiff pages and looked throughout its sections. On the fifth page, I found these words, beginning the dense blocks of print beneath an advertisement for decorative tiles: *Like many of my fellow Beasts, I was born to freedom, in a small village named Dekalion, the confluence of five centaur herds*.

I continued writing my pages, but it was difficult to get candles in order to compose at night. I limited myself to one chapter each purple month, and used any extra luminescence to correct and edit my prose. I composed paragraphs while working for Jolietta making pills or feeding the dwarf dragons, and polished them as I sat eating or doing handiwork in the evenings.

I did not grow up believing in Gods, such as the Humans follow. And even now, when the Humans insist that everything is theirs, a gift from those Gods, I find myself dubious, though I know I might find myself slain for such words. The Humans do as they will, and firstly say that we are like infants who must be looked over and then say we are monsters who must be controlled, creatures incapable of rising above their natures, who will do wrong to them if we are allowed to be our own agents. And so I questioned these things, and asked my fellow Beasts if they did not question them as well.

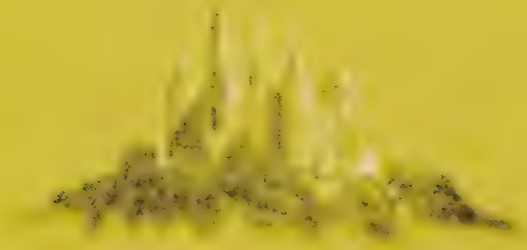
Part VIII
The aftermath

It is unknown how Fino's mistress discovered his activities, but on the day he was due to pass his next manuscript to his correspondent, it failed to arrive. The messenger stopped at Piper Hill to secretly ask after him, and was told that he was ill.

Subsequent queries learned that she had performed some surgery on him that robbed him of the majority of his intelligence, rendering him able to feed and tend himself, but little else, and that shortly thereafter he had been sold to a passing trader, and taken to the Old Continent.

His fate is unknown as of this writing. The last piece of his narrative was smuggled out, but the hand is illegible and hurried, and only the first sentence can be read.

It says only this: "I am determined to disobey."



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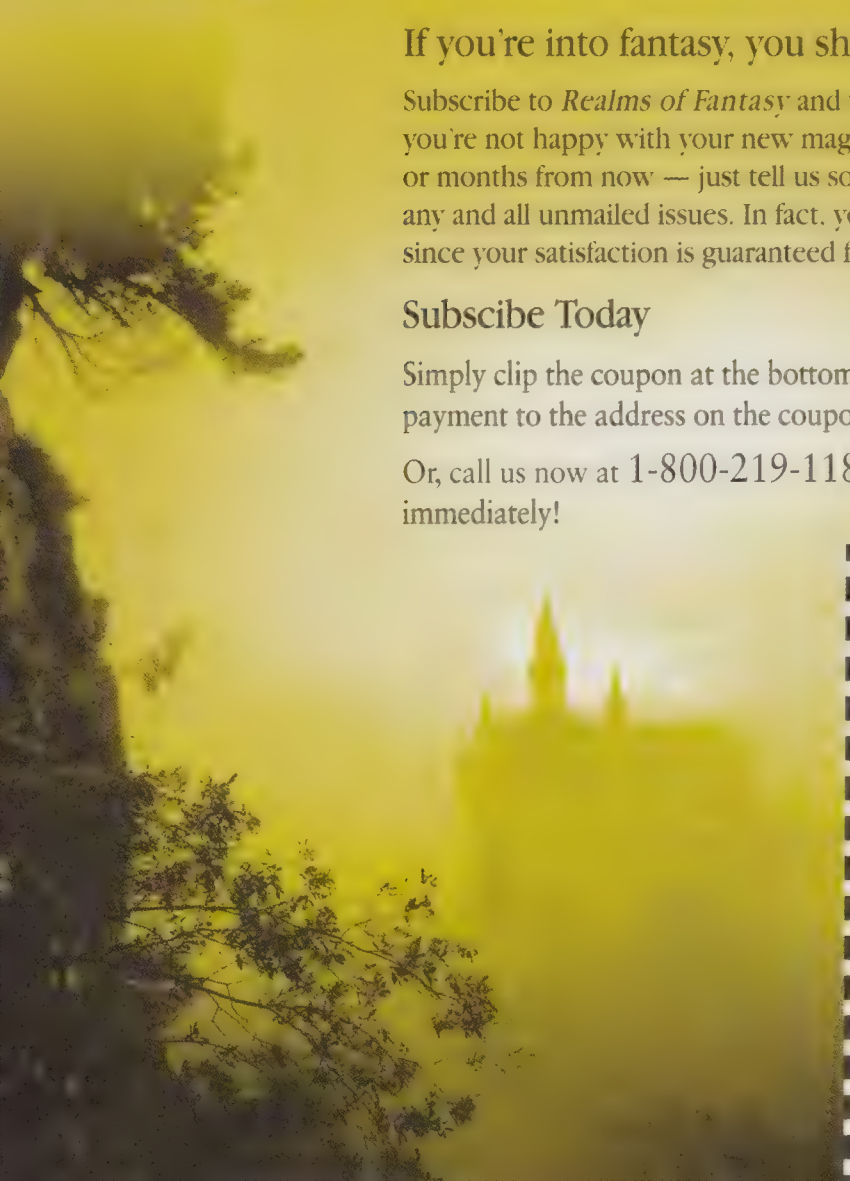

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Jill Bauman, Her Heart Belongs To Horror

by Karen Haber

Jill Bauman is one artist who's not afraid to play in the dark.

Jill Bauman is one artist who's not afraid to play in the dark.

She's an acclaimed pioneer who forged a place for herself as a professional illustrator when horror was *really* a boys' club. Jill has made a specialty of depicting the dark side of fantasy on canvas and paper. She takes a certain wicked delight in depicting images guaranteed to raise the viewer's discomfort level. On her easel, a heart-shaped box of candy turns into a deeply disturbing gift in *Dark Assortment*, while a simple child's toy becomes anything-but-innocent in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*.

"I like to disturb," Jill says, "not disgust. There's a delicate line between making it intriguing and making it disgusting."

As the many works on her website make clear, she's got a long habit of painting unsettling visions, but she'll also wield a brush on the bright side of the force. "One of the things I love to paint is animals and wildlife art. Anything that relates to nature." Over her twenty-nine-year career, Jill has provided artwork for mass media and for many genres including mystery, science fiction, fantasy, and children's books, but her heart belongs to horror. Renowned author Harlan Ellison, whose books she has often illustrated, has called her "The Unofficial Queen of the Horror Artists." What did it take to achieve that crown? Hard work and lots of it.

A Chesley- and five-time World Fantasy Award-nominee, Jill has produced hundreds of book covers and many hundreds of illustrations for major publishers including

Berkley Publishing Group, Ace Books, Doubleday, Viking/ Penguin, St. Martin's Press, Easton Press, and DAW. Among the writers whose work she's illustrated and/or painted cover art for are Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, and a long scroll of other literary luminaries including J. G. Ballard, Ramsey Campbell, Lilian Braun, Charles Grant, Suzette Elgin, Fritz Leiber, Jack Williamson, Harry Harrison, and Michael Swanwick. Her drawings and paintings have also appeared on covers and interiors of many magazines such as *Weird Tales*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Fangoria*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Reader's Digest*.

She was a World Fantasy judge in 1991, Spectrum Annual judge in 1996, and recently completed judging for the 2009 Science Fiction Hall of Fame. She's also enjoyed a dream-come-true for any artist: her work has been exhibited at the Delaware Art Museum, the Moore Gallery of Art in Philadelphia, the Seattle Science Fiction Museum, and at both the Lever House and The Society og Illustrators in New York City.

Jill paints by hand in acrylic and says that she likes to paint large, to make a mess on canvas. "I like to get lost in it. It's a physical thing, meditative. You become a part of it and lose the world around you." She says that pencil is her favorite medium. And yes, she does save all of her paintings in digital form.

Why does she avoid dipping her brush in blood? "I think symbolism is a better way to go. You want to intrigue the viewer. I like to have fun with the image and idea. I don't even like to look at graphic violent images or watch horror movies.

"I like surrealism. Mystery offers some of the best-designed covers out there. And you have to be careful what you put on those covers: you don't want to give the plot away. You have to get symbolic and creative."

Occasionally, a great notion occurs under pressure. "For the illustration for *Gormenghast* by Mervyn Peake (Easton Press), I was working on an incredibly tight deadline without a preliminary sketch. Suddenly I thought, "Why don't I just make the characters part of the actual castle? Sometimes the less time you have to think, the better it is so you don't start intellectualizing. Although I admit that I did add one more cat, hanging out of a window, as an afterthought. But that was it."

It wasn't easy for her as a young artist, especially working in a domain that wasn't deemed appropriate for women. "When I started out, I was told: 'You aren't going to make it in this field. You have to learn how to paint like Frank Frazetta.'

"With all due respect to Mr. Frazetta, I didn't want to do that. I was different, and I liked being different. It was fun bucking the guys. I wasn't competing with them, with those graphic horror artists. I never kill people in my work, but I *will* kill things on canvas." She chuckles.

"Harlan calls them my 'dead doll' paintings.

"My approach is instinctual. I don't intellectualize. When I'm reading, something pops into my head. Often the first thing that pops up is the image I end up going with. I try to catch the essence of the book, and boil it down to my way of seeing it. For example, the three paintings I did for the leather-bound edition of Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* are very symbolic instead of graphic body parts."

Speaking of King, Jill will have three pieces included in the upcoming mammoth volume *Artists Inspired by Stephen King* from Centipede Press in November.

"I can appreciate horror from both sides, as an artist and a reader. I've always loved reading. Lovecraft and Poe are my heroes. That's why it was a special pleasure for me to do frontispieces for the numbered and lettered editions of Stewart O'Nan's *Poe: A Screenplay* (Lonely Road Books), which has just been published. I've been fortunate to have great sources, writers whose work I have a real feel for when I illustrate it."

How did she become an artist? According to her website bio, it all began when she was small, and given a "magic stick"—a pencil. "I used this *magic stick* to write on paper, walls, floors, or any surface that I could find, even though my parents didn't always appreciate where I chose to create my murals. Then, I began to discover that I could control this tool. In time, the crayon joined the pencil." Jill says that the smell of crayons still evokes those first heady moments of artistic discovery, when she realized she was an artist to the bone.

"As I became an adult, and with all the 'twists and turns' of life, I've used art as a means of personal expression. It became my passion, an outlet, and a means of communication, but it took the insistence of others to begin to show my work professionally. I wasn't aware that the work that I was creating on my own had a place in the 'commercial' world.

"I had my own vision, but found a way to satisfy the publishing market and still maintain my artistic integrity, enthusiasm, and imagination. For me, this has been a journey of pure delight."

Perhaps the key to Jill's success was her determination to stay true to her own visions, and her flexibility as an artist. "To survive

in this field long-term, you have to be adaptable," she says. "Kicking and screaming, I was dragged into the twenty-first century with computers, and was shocked by how intuitive it was for me. Please note, I work on a PC, not a MAC, and I even did my own website, with Dreamweaver." The painting on the title page of Jill's website features one of her daughters as the book-loving model with the demon peering over her shoulder.

A single mother who raised two daughters and worked as an artist at a time when that was far from commonplace, Jill found that being a trailblazer meant that even her parents were challenged by her subject matter. "My parents said: '*What are you doing?! These aren't pretty pictures!*'" She laughs at the memory. "It wasn't until I painted 'Crystal World,' that they came around and said, 'Finally you painted something pretty!' But what *I* liked best was when my father said, 'I don't understand anything that you do, but I'm very proud of you.'"

Her two daughters became accustomed to having a mom who did weird stuff: stayed up late listening to rock music and covering paper and canvas with strange images, working all night, occasionally using her offspring and their friends as models. "Each painting has its own soundtrack," Jill says. "I'll listen to music over and over again while I'm working. And I always work best at night."

How does she relax? By writing poetry. In fact, she's had nineteen poems published by magazines such as *Weird Tales*, *Flesh and Blood Magazine*, and *Inhuman Magazine*, to name a few. She's currently putting together a poetry collection of dark poetry titled *Inkblots*.

"I paint with words," she says. "I do it for me: they tell stories. I've always liked to write and paint. I did it as a kid, but back then I had to learn not to do it on the walls."

She's also developed a series of three-dimensional miniature artworks she calls "Nighthings" which she sells on her website. "I create these itty bitty paintings with air-dried clay that are both two- and three-dimensional. I paint images of creatures on canvas or board, and then set them into decorative frames. I then bring out parts of the image onto the canvas with air-dry clay."

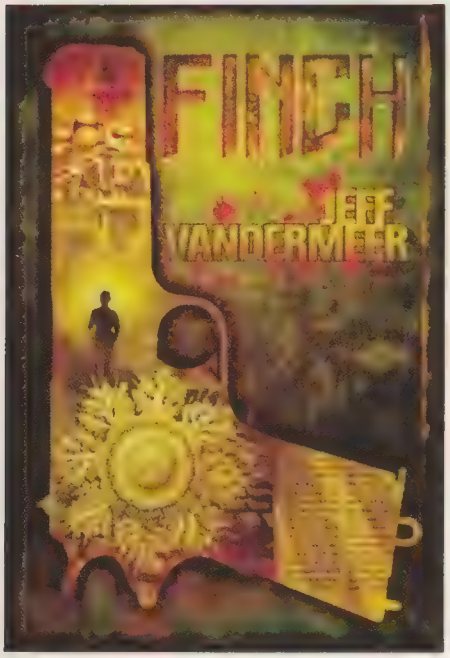
After "playing" in the dark so long, what's her theory about why horror has such lasting appeal?

"We need the escapism. We all have darkness in our lives. Literature and art are good places to put it, to control it. You can be scared, but it's just a book, rather than life. Escapism is essential for us, it's healthy. In fact, when times were the worst, I painted the best. I think that people who read horror and dark fantasy need this, clearly. We want to be scared, but we don't want to be *too* scared."

Her website is www.jillbauman.com. ☙

Books

Paul Witcover
Matt Staggs



Jeff VanderMeer has explored the city of Ambergris in two remarkable works: *City of Saints and Madmen*, a collection of fictional artifacts, including stories, set in and below that moldering municipality alongside the wonderfully named River Moth, and *Shriek: An Afterword*, an intricately composed masterpiece about a brother and sister's emotionally incestuous relationship that came off like a collaboration between Vladimir Nabokov and H. P. Lovecraft. Now comes the final—or such, I believe, is the author's present intent—volume in this trilogy of asymmetrically linked novels: *Finch* (Underland Press, trade paperback, 320 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-0-9802260-1-0).

VanderMeer's affection for the tropes of noir fiction has long been plain: the lone knight in tarnished armor desperately holding on to an outmoded code of honor and chivalry amidst the myriad temptations of corruption, fleshly and otherwise. His science fiction novel, *Veniss Underground*, had a pronounced noirish tone. And the previous Ambergris books, too, have shown the influence of noir, especially in the depiction of Ambergris itself as a city that has gone quite literally to seed, a place where good intentions are inevitably poisoned, deadly secrets loom like the mushrooms that sprout from every available surface, whether stone or flesh, and buried crimes constantly threaten to rise into plain sight. With *Finch*, VanderMeer has made what was always a component of his fiction the predominant aspect: in style, in structure, in character, this is a work of noir. What makes the novel so interesting—apart from the seeming ease with which VanderMeer, like some literary Tiger Woods, has stripped down and reworked his style—is that, while it still contains distinctive elements of dark fantasy and horror—given the setting, how could it not?—*Finch* doesn't graft these elements onto a noir template but makes a very strong case for the idea that fantasy and horror are already implicit in the DNA of noir. This is no Frankenstein monster of a novel, with bits and pieces of other genres sewn and stapled on, however artfully; no, this is a revelation of the secret underground sources of noir fiction. Like Jeffrey Thomas's Punktown series, *Finch* stakes a claim for noir as fantastic literature.

The novel takes place about a century after the events related in *Shriek*. In that time, a disastrous war against the neighboring kingdom of the Kalif gave way to a prolonged civil war pitting two powerful mercantile houses, Hoegbotton and Franwrithe & Lewden, against each other. In the course of that debilitating civil war, the Gray Caps, the original—and quite non-human—inhabitants of what became the city of Ambergris, long relegated by choice and oppression to the dank, dark spaces below the city, have risen up to take control of the city that was once theirs. As the novel opens, we are six years into the rule of the Gray Caps.

The Gray Caps are Lovecraftian creatures—inhuman, unknowable, maleficent. In appearance they are somewhat fungoid, and their technology, or magic, involves all manner of unsavory subterranean growths turned to every malign use imaginable. The secret of their origin, heretofore a matter of myth and legend, is at last explained in *Finch*, and it's characteristic not only of VanderMeer but of his fictional models here that the explanation, when it comes, raises more questions than it answers, and the facts, such as they are, are more horrific than the legends they replace.

The novel's eponymous hero, John Finch, is a detective working the day shift in Ambergris; his superior is a Gray Cap, Heretic. The set-up of a dispirited detective with secrets of his own to hide, working for the evil occupiers of the city he loves, and caught up—through his investigation of a murder, and despite his best efforts to the contrary—in political machinations way above his pay grade, calls to mind the subgenre of thrillers and detective novels set in Paris during the Nazi occupation, complete with an indigenous resistance movement and a plethora of thugs and spies representing various outside interests. VanderMeer very consciously, if subtly, evokes these parallels to dramatic effect.

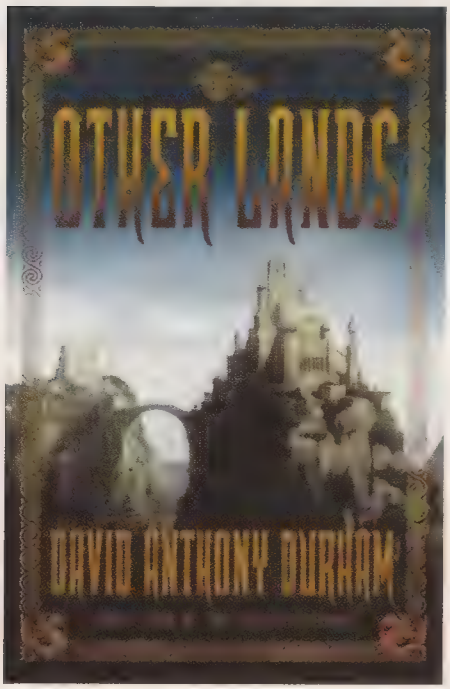
Here it's a double murder that sucks Finch into what rapidly becomes a cesspool of human and non-human ambition and cruelty, twisted loyalties, and poisoned loves. In a closed room, two corpses are found—one a human, the other a Gray Cap: the latter cut neatly in half, the bottom half missing, and the former showing evidence of having fallen from a great height.

When Finch ingests the memory bulbs that sprout from the corpses—an act that risks insanity and death—he finds himself not merely witness to the jumbled memories and impressions of the deceased, but actually addressed by one of them. What he learns from this personage links back to *City of Saints and Madmen* and, even more so, to *Shriek*. Suddenly Finch is himself a person of interest—to his bosses, to the creepy collaborators known as Partials, to infiltrators from a rival city, and to the resistance fighters led by the enigmatic and possibly mythical Lady in Blue.

Against the backdrop of the double murder, and the conspiratorial web that Finch has stumbled into, Ambergris is approaching a new crisis point. The Gray Caps have been feverishly building two

towers, and as the completion of these towers nears, the atmosphere of dread that habitually blankets the city intensifies. It's rumored that the towers are weapons, machines, altars, gateways, take your pick. The general sense among the humans and Partials of Ambergris is that something even more terrible than anything that has gone before will occur when the towers are finished. This mirror image of 9/11 is a stroke of genius on VanderMeer's part, not the destruction of twin towers but their construction signaling some great and horrible change in the world. It's emblematic of the way in which this novel, like the best fantasies, intersects with the real world. I know I've made this point in my columns before, but it's worth repeating: superior fantasy is all about engagement, not escape.

As the disparate threads, personal and political, of VanderMeer's plot converge, *Finch* takes on a dire momentum that readers will find difficult to resist.



David Anthony Durham's *Acacia* was one of my favorite novels of 2007, a strong and deceptively original foray into fantasy by a writer whose previous books had been mainstream historical fiction—deceptively, because while he seemed to be following in the footsteps of George R.R. Martin, and indeed in many respects of plot and setting was doing just that, in other respects, notably race and gender, Durham was going his own way, writing a fantasy that explored and embraced concepts of otherness that much of traditional fantasy has either ignored or been blind to. Now, with *The Other Lands: Book Two of the Acacia Trilogy* (Doubleday, New York, hardcover, 480 pp., $28.00, ISBN: 978-0-385-52332-5), which puts this theme of otherness right into its title, this talented young author—winner of the 2009 Campbell Award for best new writer—continues his epic tale. Readers who haven't yet read *Acacia* should beware of spoilers below.

The novel opens nine years after the close of *Acacia*. The Mein have been defeated and all but eradicated. Corinn Akaran sits unchallenged upon the throne of a reconstituted Acacian empire, guarded by her former enemies, the savage Numrek, and assisted by her sister, Mena, and her surviving brother, Dariel. Her other brother, Aliver, who died a tragic—some would say foolhardy—death at the end of book one, remains a strong presence, remembered as a martyr and revered as an almost godlike figure who, had he lived, would not merely have reclaimed the empire from the Mein, but would have reformed it utterly, abolishing every injustice and satisfying every want. Corinn finds herself forced to confront all the challenges left unmet by Aliver, as well as all the expectations he encouraged, and inevitably her decisions suffer by comparison to the perfect decisions Aliver would have made but never had to. Yet little by little, by sheer force of will, Corinn is rebuilding the empire—though to some, especially the itinerant rabble-rouser Barad the Younger, the new Acacia too closely resembles the old.

That empire infamously assured a placid citizenry by addicting them to a drug called mist, which was obtained from the Lothan Aklun, a mysterious people dwelling across a sea so forbidding that only the ships of the independent League of Vessels have ever safely made the journey to the so-called Other Lands and back again. In exchange for the drug, the empire supplied the Lothan Aklun with a quota of children. The use to which these children were put were never inquired into too deeply by Corinn's predecessors; it is only known that the Lothan Aklun supplied them to an even more mysterious people, the Auldek.

Though Aliver used the magic of a

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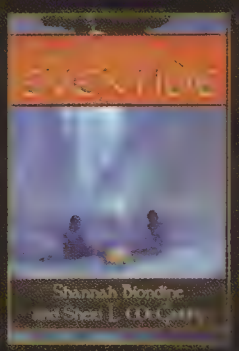


Twice Upon an Eventide

By Sheri L. McGathy

ISBN-13: 978-1-55404-573-0

Published By Double Dragon Publishing

www.sherilmcgathy.com

group of all-but-immortal sorcerers, the Santoth, to cure people of their dependency on mist, the trade in children has continued under Corinn, who has also taken steps, through the League, to develop a substitute for mist that will have a similar effect, for she has found that she prefers to deal with a docile citizenry which does not question or criticize her actions. Better that they should be like sheep, so she can lead them to greener pastures—while culling their children for the slaughter… or whatever awaits them with the Auldek. Her own child, Aaden, is, of course, exempt from this selection.

When the League conveys an invitation from the Lothan Aklun, Corinn jumps at the chance to renegotiate the old agreement, and dispatches Dariel and her advisor, Rialos Neptos, a shrewd coward, and a contingent of Numrek, who reveal that they are distant relations of the Auldek. This mission to the Other Lands will expose Dariel to shocking revelations and brutal betrayals that will threaten not only his own life, but that of all people across the sea.

Back in Acacia, a young girl named Shen appears among the Talayan tribes that sheltered Aliver after his father's murder. She claims to be his daughter, and further states that the Santoth, who disappeared following his death, have summoned her to them. Secretly, accompanied by one of Aliver's oldest friends, Kelis, she sets out for a fateful meeting.

Meanwhile, as Barad the Younger incites rebellion against Corinn, the queen is delving into the forbidden magic of a long-lost tome, *The Song of Elenet*, and using what she learns to strengthen her hold on power and on the hearts of her people. But it may be that the book is also using her….

The Other Lands takes a while to find itself, but once it does, it's a riveting and thought-provoking read. The otherness of the Other Lands is at once bizarre and believable, and what Dariel discovers there takes the narrative in new and unexpected directions. Durham is drawn to characters who undergo difficult and painful change, and his portrayal of the effects of these changes is psychologically acute. The name of the impassable sea separating Acacia from the Other Lands, the Grey Slopes, is also an apt description of the moral landscape into which Durham has plunged his characters, to sink or to swim.

Hope-in-the-Mist (Temporary Culture, New Jersey, trade paperback, 100 pp., $20.00, ISBN: 978-0-9764660-5-5) is Michael Swanwick's latest venture into nonfiction, a long biographical and critical essay about influential fantasy writer Hope Mirrlees and her best-known novel, *Lud-in-the-Mist*. Indeed, were in not for this novel, which even today is poorly known outside a relatively small circle of aficionados, Mirrlees would be at best a footnote in the wider world of literature—due to her friendship with Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and other literary luminaries of the 1930s, as well as her authorship of a single long poem, *Paris*, held by some critics to have influenced Eliot in writing *The Wasteland*—and of no significance whatsoever in the field of the fantastic. Yet because of it, Mirrlees must be reckoned one of the most important twentieth-century fantasists—or such is the claim that Swanwick makes, and I think sustains, in this slim but thoroughly researched and passionately written volume.

Composed with a sure hand in a literary yet colloquial style that finds ample room for elevated poetry and low comedy, and written in an easy mix of styles and genres that we would call postmodern had the novel not been originally published in 1926, *Lud-in-the-Mist* is filled

with characters whose quirky names and natures are deeply endearing: it's part fantasy of manners, part satire, part detective story. But its approach to the fantastic is sui generis for the time. What sets this remarkable novel apart from its contemporaries was Mirrlees' great theme of, to quote Neil Gaiman, "the reconciliation of the fantastic and the mundane." If this powerful theme, fraught with melancholy and longing, went on to become a central preoccupation of genre fantasy, it wasn't so much because of Mirrlees' influence as because she early on sensed something that other, later writers rediscovered: she was a bit of a prophet, I suppose you could say. When I read *Lud-in-the-Mist* for the first time, in my forties, my reaction was one of amazement as I realized I was holding in my hands a kind of literary missing link, a small masterpiece that filled in the gaps between Andrew Lang's Fairy Books and John Crowley's *Little, Big*.

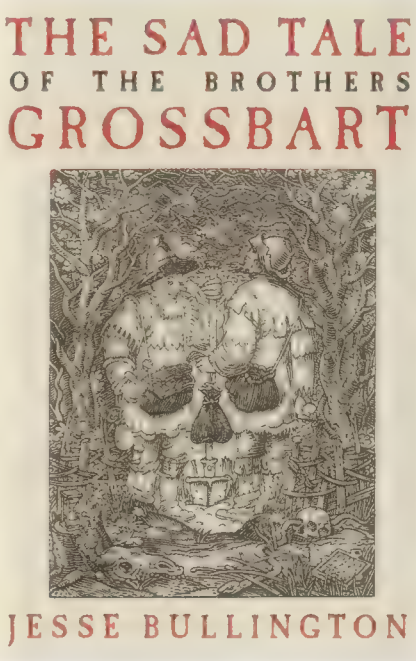
The novel is set in the country of Dorimare, a mercantile republic that shares a border with Fairyland. Once there was substantial commerce between the two, but a revolution that toppled Dorimare's cruel and capricious ruler, Duke Aubrey, sundered all relations, save for an illicit trade in fairy fruit, which, like heroin, is both addictive and destructive. When the son of Nathan Chanticleer, the determinedly mundane mayor of the town of Lud-in-the-Mist, partakes of fairy fruit and disappears across the border, Chanticleer, a by-no-means heroic figure, sets out to bring him back.

But what of the author? Who was Hope Mirrlees? How did she come to write this strange and moving novel, which had virtually nothing in common with anything she had written previously? And why did she write nothing of importance, or interest, or much of anything at all, really, afterward? These are just some of the mysteries Swanwick sets out to explore.

Mirrlees was born into a wealthy English family, and for most of her life had no need to worry about money. Writing was, to be blunt about it, a hobby for her: a serious hobby, yes, but not a profession. She was a talented amateur: a rich girl at home in exclusive literary and social circles, an intimate of the Bloomsbury Set who flitted hummingbird-like from flower to flower in that hothouse garden of English eccentrics. She was involved in a long and passionate relationship with an older woman, the renowned classicist Jane Harrison, whose scholarship has also, albeit more tangentially, had an impact on modern fantasy, especially in its feminist elaborations, but whether or not that relationship was overtly sexual is unclear. It was Harrison's death, in 1928, that seems to have caused Mirrlees to withdraw from an active literary life, but not even Swanwick can uncover the full story behind her baffling silence. If anything, the mysteries surrounding Mirrlees are more pronounced at the end of Swanwick's book than at the beginning; *Lud-in-the-Mist* seems all the more a remarkable achievement, almost a miracle. I count Swanwick's failure to sum things neatly up as a triumph of the novelist over the biographer, and a fitting tribute to his elusive subject, who remains, for all his illumination and insight, tantalizingly shrouded in the mist. Future biographers of Mirrlees, historians of fantasy, and casual readers intrigued by the woman and her one indisputable masterpiece owe him a debt of gratitude for his artful, respectful scholarship.

Appended to the essay is Swanwick's "A Lexicon of Lud," which first appeared in the *New York Review of Science Fiction* some years ago. It's a delightfully erudite exegesis of terms and characters from *Lud-in-the-Mist* that deserves to be the foundation of an annotated edition. Perhaps someday, it will be.

Anyone jonesing for the ninth installment of Steven Erikson's Malazan Book of the Fallen can take the edge off the wait with *The Lees of Laughter's End* (Night Shade Books, San Francisco, hardcover, 128 pp., $25.00, ISBN: 978-1-59780-144-7), the third in an open-ended series of novellas set prior to the main action of the Book of the Fallen, and featuring three minor characters from that monumental work: the sinister if somewhat inept sorcerers Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, and their bumbling manservant, Emancipor Reese. Each of these novellas—the previous two were *Blood Follows* and *The Healthy Dead*—tells a self-contained story, but there is also a longer arc progressing through them that, one suspects, will ultimately result in the novellas being stitched together for publication as a standalone novel. *Blood Follows* told how Emancipor Reese gained employment with the sorcerers in the midst of a rash of unsolved murders unsettling the city of Lamentable Moll; in *The Healthy Dead*, the trio found themselves in the city of Quaint, whose citizens, protected from their own worst impulses by the stern beneficence of their king, desperately long for a return of the old vices that vanished with their former ruler, who was violently deposed and killed. In each case, the intervention of Bauchelain, a conjuror of demons, and Korbal Broach, a necromancer—both of whom are, incidentally as it were, serial killers—worsens an already intolerable situation and drives the hapless Emancipor ever deeper into a state of drug-addled dependency. Now, in the present volume, our heroes find themselves quite literally at sea—aboard the ship *Suncurl*, which carries a mysterious cargo in its hold, ghostly revenants in its planks, a deathless thing in its crow's-nest, and the usual assortment of cut-throats in its crew. Events already in progress ensare Bauchelain, Korbal, and Emancipor, who, at the same time, are up to (mostly) no good of their own. — by **Paul Witcover**



***The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart*, Jesse Bullington, Orbit, New York, NY, trade paperback, 464 pp., $14.99, ISBN: 978-0316049344**

Young Adult Fantasy Books

By Michael Jones

***Ash*, by Malinda Lo, Little, Brown Young Readers, hardcover, $16.99, 272 pages ISBN 978-0316040099**

After the death of her parents, Ash is left in the care of her cruel stepmother, with only the fairy tales of her youth to comfort her. Yearning for the fairies to take her away to their world, she seeks them out repeatedly, soon incurring a debt for their aid. When Ash meets Kaisa, the King's Huntress, and strikes up a fragile, hesitant friendship, she finds something worth living for. All too soon, her debt comes due, and Ash has to choose between something she's always wanted, and the newfound stirrings in her heart. Lush imagery, rich emotions, and sensual undertones make for a strong story, especially since in this lesbian reimagining of Cinderella, the heroine doesn't need a prince to complete her life. Romantic and unforgettable, *Ash* is a beautiful spin on a familiar story.

***Libyrinth*, by Pearl North, Tor Teen, hardcover, $17.99, 336 pages, ISBN 9780765320964**

Millennia from now, the legacy of Earth lives on, in the form of two warring factions on a distant planet. In the Libyrinth, books are hoarded and protected by those who treasure literacy and knowledge. The Eradicants, who pass their knowledge down through the oral tradition, believe books must be destroyed to free the words. With the discovery of the fabled *Book of the Night*, both sides see an opportunity to defeat the other, but it's those few individuals caught in the middle who will decide the fate of an entire world. Haly, a clerk in the Libyrinth, can actually hear books speak to her; it's this ability which makes her a vital figure in a clash between two similar, yet opposed cultures. But can either side live without the other? Philosophical, powerful, captivating, and populated by memorable characters, this is not a book to pass up lightly.

***Shiver*, by Maggie Stiefvater, Scholastic Press, hardcover, $17.99, 400 pages, ISBN 978-0545123266**

For years, a mysterious connection has existed between Grace and the yellow-eyed wolf that once saved her from his own kind as a child. Little does she know that the wolf spends his summers as a human, and that as Sam, he's irresistibly drawn to her. All that changes when a local boy dies mysteriously, and a resultant backlash against the wolves of the area brings Sam and Grace together at last. Their romance is a swift and deep

Unlikely searchers:
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Rafi...a young gryphon allergic to magic
Jody Burns...wants to get back to shopping at the mall
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one, made all the more precious by the awareness of a time limit: when it gets too cold, Sam will become a wolf once more, never again to wear human form. Is their love doomed before it's even begun? Featuring a uniquely compelling twist on the werewolf mythos, and a powerful, believable relationship, *Shiver* captures the reader and doesn't let go. The narrative spins forth with a complex blend of stark images and richly layered descriptions, making this book impossible to put down. ***Never Slow Dance with a Zombie*, by E. Van Lowe, Tor Teen, trade paperback,**

$8.99, 256 pages, ISBN 978-0765320407

Usually, the worst Margot Jean Johnson has to worry about is her lack of a boyfriend, and the mockery of her nemesis, Amanda Culpepper. But that's before the vast majority of her high school are turned into brainless zombies. and eccentric Principal Taft chooses to peacefully coexist with them, rather than panic. Now Margot and her best friend Sybil are queens of the school (by sheer virtue of not being undead). Can they make it to the end of semester, or is someone going to become zombie chow? What's behind the zombie plague, and is there a cure? Does anyone even care? Whimsical and tongue-in-cheek, this book mixes dark humor and high school angst surprisingly well, provided you come equipped with plenty of suspension of disbelief for the antics contained within.

***Bite Me!* by Melissa Francis, HarperTeen, trade paperback, $8.99, 304 pages, ISBN 978-0061430985**

Teenage vampire AJ Ashe is having the worst year ever. Her boyfriend is now her stepbrother. She may have accidentally turned her rebound hookup into a vampire. Someone's framing her for everything from cheating on tests to getting a little too close to a teacher, and her two best friends are feuding with one another. Oh, and her long-out-of-the-picture father was apparently one of the Bad Sort of vampires. Can AJ unravel this mess and figure out what her role in all of this is, or is she a pawn in something large and sinister? Though convoluted and resembling a soap opera (or sitcom), there's an undeniable sense of quirky attitude and fun present all the same. Unfortunately, a lot of the questions raised here will have to wait for the inevitable sequel for their answers.

***The Eternal Kiss*, edited by Trisha Telep, RP Teens, trade paperback, $9.95, 416 pages, ISBN 978-0762437177**

In this all-new anthology of vampire stories, fourteen authors explore the dangerous relationship between blood and desire, looking at how the romanticized undead interact with their victims, prey, and lovers. Among the stronger stories are Maria Snyder's "Sword Point," Holly Black's "The Coldest Girl in Coldtown," and Libba Bray's "The Thirteenth Step." Rachel Caine's "All Hallows" offers another entry in her Morganville Vampires series, and Cecil Castellucci's "Wet Teeth" is bound to leave readers somewhat disquieted. "Passing," by Nancy Holder and Debbie Viguie, feels like the start of something larger, as does Dina James' "All Wounds." With authors such as Cassandra Clare, Kelley Armstrong, and Sarah Rees Brennan contributing, there's plenty to appeal to vampire fans, especially the *Twilight* crowd. There's no real weak link in this anthology, and more enjoyable than not.

***Gifted: Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, by Marilyn Kaye, Kingfisher, trade paperback, $7.99, 240 pages, ISBN 9780753462836**

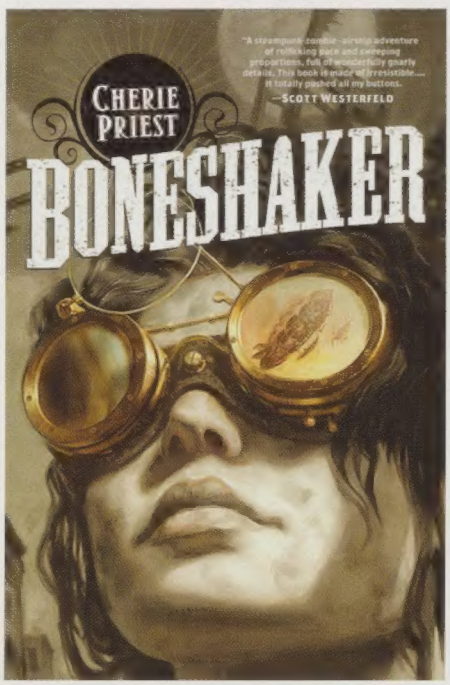
At Meadowbrook Middle School, they don't come meaner or more popular than Amanda Beeson. What no one knows is that Amanda can't afford to feel pity or empathy for someone, lest her consciousness inhabit their body for an unspecified period of time. One day, she slips, and wakes up in the body of Tracey Devon, school outcast with a bizarre secret of her own. Unable to reverse the effect, Amanda is trapped as a loser, forced to deal with Tracey's problems. She's not the only one at Meadowbrook with strange powers, and things will never be the same again. Not for Amanda, Tracey, or any of the others. Though a little simplistic at times, this start to a new series sets up an intriguing premise and lays the ground for some thought-provoking stories. I'll be interested to see where Kaye's going with this.

Hegel and Manfried Grossbart's grandfather, a grave-robber of no small reputation, left the family years ago to plunder Egypt's legendary tombs. *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart* follows them as they make their way from the backwaters of the Holy Roman Empire to find and claim his fortune. A picaresque tale, Hegel and Manfried are ignorant and crude; murderers and gold-crazed opportunists who leave a swath of blood and terror in their journey across fourteenth-century Europe. What allows the novel to become more than a simple recitation of horrors is the complexity of the characters: the brothers. it seems. are motivated by a virulent, home-brewed version of Christianity that is faintly reminiscent of that of Hazel Motes. the protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*. Theirs is a singularly perverse theology: God himself is a murderous devil, the Virgin Mary his unwilling consort, and Jesus Christ not a redeemer but a weakling son who deserved what he got. The brothers believe themselves to be favored by Mary, who, by the gospel according to the Grossbarts, favors those who defy the will of God: namely, the Grossbarts. Seeing themselves as two

righteous men in a heretical world, the brothers find no lack of justification for the gross acts of violence they visit on those unfortunates who cross their path. Much like Hazel Motes, Hegel Grossbart elects himself to a divine position, a living "saint" who, after suffering a dubious martyrdom, declares himself able to offer salvation to the "sinners" who surround him. Also, like O'Connor's South, Bullington's Europe is "Christ-haunted": they gain a heretical, half-mad priest as a traveling companion. They're pursued by demons. At one point, they even cross paths with "the Road Popes": a group of bandits clothed in a mockery of sacred vestments. Further, it is not only in its religious themes that comparisons may be drawn between *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart* and the Southern Gothic literary tradition. Much of the novel's action takes place in haunted, rural landscapes dotted with isolated, ramshackle dwellings. The Alpine mountains and choked Germanic forests could easily stand in for the Deep South's Appalachia, and Bullington represents the brothers' speech in a rural eye dialect that isn't terribly far removed from the way authors like Faulkner represented their own Southern characters. The brothers do find their way out of the woods, eventually, as their journey leads them to Venice, Rhodes, and Egypt. However, the rural countryside maintains its hold on them, with the fruits of the evils they committed dogging their every step. This tale, the title warns, is one without a happy ending. A blackly humorous fantasy full of monsters, demons, and witches, there's more than enough here to engage the reader looking for that, but beneath the surface *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart* is a novel of surprising complexity.

***The Red Tree*, Caitlín R. Kiernan, Roc, New York, NY, trade paperback, 400 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-0451462763**

Grieving the death of her partner and faced with a looming deadline for her next book, author Sarah Crowe leaves the city for life in a secluded Rhode Island farmhouse. After moving in, she discovers that the property has a gruesome past seemingly centered upon an enormous red oak tree located on the property. Prior to Crowe's arrival, the farmhouse was leased by a professor of folklore who, during the course of researching the tree, committed suicide. Crowe finds his uncompleted manuscript, which she begins to read out of both boredom and a desire to put off her own work as long as possible. The manuscript reports a number of inexplicable events and bloody murders that have occurred around the tree: a legacy of horror that apparently began well before the arrival of the first European colonists. Skeptical, she considers this history to be of trivial interest and little more, but soon she herself begins to feel the malign influence of the tree—or at least she thinks she does. Crowe is in poor health: she doesn't sleep very well, and has to take medication for a mysterious seizure disorder. On top of that, she mixes alcohol with her medication and practically never eats. Given that Sarah is the very definition of the "unreliable narrator", it is up to the reader to determine what is really happening—if anything. *The Red Tree* is an exercise in intimation: much is implied but never fully confirmed. The fantastic elements of the story remain forever cloaked in shadow and suggestion, or—in the case of events from the historical record—


"A steampunk zombie airship adventure of rollicking pace and sweeping proportions, full of wonderfully gnarly details. This book is more irresistible... it totally pushed all my buttons."
—SCOTT WESTERFELD
CHERIE PRIEST
BONESHAKER

obscured by the passage of years. It is in this aspect that *The Red Tree* is reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* which, not coincidentally, is listed as one of many of the author's influences in the book's closing notes. An excellent dark fantasy, *The Red Tree* is a subtle and disturbing book, and probably Kiernan's best work yet.

***Boneshaker*, Cherie Priest, Tor, New York, NY, trade paperback, 416 pp., $15.99, ISBN: 978-0765318411**

Under commission to a Russian mining company, inventor Leviticus Blue creates an enormous vehicle designed to tunnel through glacial ice, but during the machine's first run it malfunctions, destroying the city's financial district and releasing a subterranean toxic gas called Blight that transforms the living into the living dead. Desperate to protect the rest of the city from the outbreak, residents construct an enormous wall around the affected area. Sixteen years later, Blue's widow, Briar, and their son, Ezekiel, are eking out a meager living in the shantytown that has grown up around the outskirts of the wall. Unable to accept his father's infamous reputation, Ezekiel sneaks into the zombie-haunted ruins beyond the wall in search of evidence that could clear his father's name. Learning of Ezekiel's plan, Briar launches a rescue attempt, catching a ride on a pirate airship into the city. Far from being deserted, both discover that the ruins have become host to subterranean communities of gas-mask-wearing scavengers who appreciate the freedoms that life beyond the wall has to offer, zombies notwithstanding. The residents are dominated by a mysterious masked man, a scientist who, if rumors are to be believed, may have once been known as Leviticus Blue, and Briar and Ezekiel's arrival now threatens to overturn what little order exists beyond the walls. While the novel leaves a few loose ends untied, a mix of steampunk gadgetry and zombie horror brings a certain pulp allure to this fast-paced, likable romp, and readers will likely enjoy it as long as they take it for the bit of escapism it is. ∞ by **Matt Staggs**

Graphic Novels

By Andrew Wheeler

Welcome back to the *Realms of Fantasy* graphic novel column after our regrettable hiatus; I'll be picking up here from my friend and colleague Jeff VanderMeer, who was last seen mumbling something about mushrooms and stalking into a swamp.

Realms has always taken the word "fantasy" expansively, and I intend to keep to that tradition in this column, reviewing book-shaped objects that mix words and pictures as long as they have fantastic elements—whether or not they're called "fantasy" explicitly. We'll steer clear of all of those memoir comics, and stay away from stories that look more like science fiction. And nothing "floppy" need apply—only things that look like actual books, with a real spine and enough pages to make it worth reading. But there's still a world of interesting comics with fantasy elements—from *Fables* to *Swallow Me Whole* to *Cat Eyed Boy* to *Hellboy*—to explore.

***Flight Volume Six*, edited by Kazu Kibuishi (Villard, New York) trade paperback, 284pp, $25.00, ISBN 978-0-345-50590-3**

First up this month is *Flight Volume Six*, the latest in a series of comics anthologies edited by Kazu Kibuishi, containing fifteen stories by his usual crew of contributors. The *Flight* books have been imitated and copied—by books like *Out of Picture* and *Scrambled Ink*—and their style isn't as unexpected as it was when *Flight One* hit in 2004. *Flight One* and its successors owed very little to either "mainstream" superheroes or the independent movement, instead drawing creators from other kids of art, particularly commercial illustration and movie/game story artists. There's still a tendency for a random *Flight* story to look storyboard-inspired, but the range of artistic styles has gotten broader, ranging from the clean lines of Steve Hamaker's slightly oddball superhero adventure "Fish N Chips" to the full-bleed concept-art style paintings of Cory Godbey's "Walters."

This volume of *Flight* is as all-ages friendly as the others; it's not specifically aimed at children, but it's appropriate for most tweens, and some of the stories (like Kean Soo's "Jellaby," about a cute purple monster, and Michel Gagné's "Saga of Rex," a wordless story of the fantastic adventures of a foxlike creature) look very much like stories for younger children than that. But a few of the tales—such as the samurai adventure of Rad Sechrist's "Kidnapped" and the Old West revenge story "Dead at Noon" by Rodolphe Guenoden—are darker, with violence moving close to a PG-13 level.

Soo's and Gagné's stories are also continuations of stories from earlier *Flight* volumes, as are a couple of other pieces

here—such as Kibuishi's own "Daisy Kutter" story, in which his pseudo-Western sheriff heroine battles what appears to be a reanimated corpse. These are mostly stand-alone, though Gagné's story—particularly because it is wordless—loses a lot without context. But the bulk of the book, as usual, is made up of discrete, new stories.

Flight Six is much like the earlier books—a little safe, a little soft, like a Hollywood "family" movie, but still a big book full of nice stories by a mostly young stable of creators who we can hope will continue to grow, mature, and extend their areas of interest.

***Mercy Thompson: Homecoming*, written by Patricia Briggs and David Lawrence, painted artwork by Francis Tsai and Amelia Woo, lettering by Bill Tortolini (Ballantine Del Rey/Dabel Brothers, New York) hardcover, 122pp, $22.95, ISBN 978-0-345-50988-8**

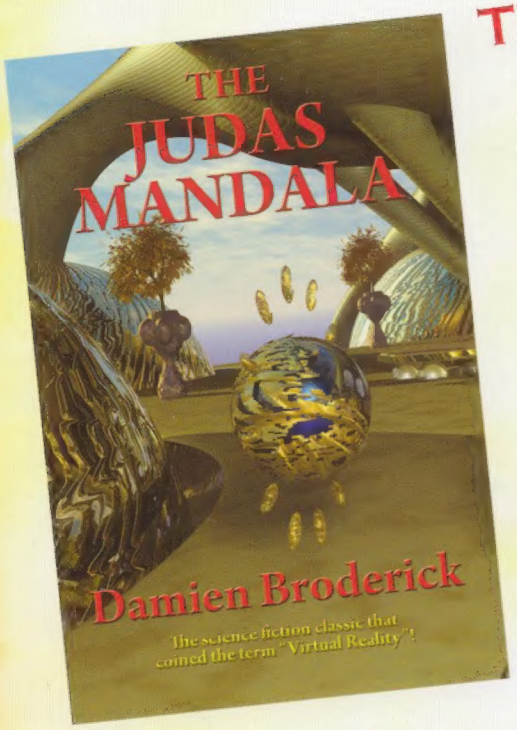
Next is a more obvious product-line extension: another comics prequel to a popular series of urban fantasy novels from the Dabel Brothers shop. They've previously comics-ized Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake (with Marvel Comics) and Jim Butcher's Harry Dresden, along with a longer list of fantasy (and a few SF) books from other major authors.

This time, their starting-with-a-prequel program is applied to Patricia Briggs' shapeshifting heroine Mercy Thompson, in a story set before her first novel, *Moon Called*. The pleasures here—aside from the very meager ones to be found from gawking at awkward painted panels of Mercy running around naked after transformations—are in seeing the pieces of that series come together: Mercy gets her job as a mechanic, meets many characters that will be important later in the series, and otherwise provides a cheat sheet for the existing books. What little plot there is here can be summed up in that one word of the title, "Homecoming."

The art—which switches from Francis Tsai to Amelia Woo partway through, without looking all that different or distinctive either way—is painted, but in a style that closely resembles modern computer-color over a slightly spiky and expressionistic version of modern mainstream "heroic" art. It looks a lot like a lot of other things, and isn't a particularly strong example of anything.

Homecoming was designed for Briggs fans, and its audience is mostly limited to them; this isn't a story likely to thrill new readers, or send them on to the Mercy Thompson novels. It's competent contemporary fantasy in comics form, and the art is only really awkward in a few places. It does feature a vampire in a do-rag and Rush T-shirt, though, which you're unlikely to find elsewhere.

New From Fantastic Books



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ISBN 1604598182

By Damien Broderick

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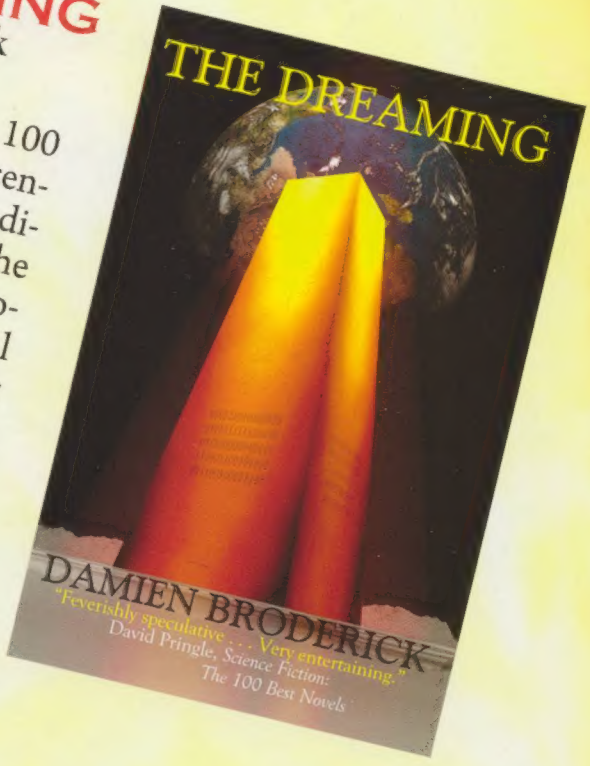

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